



Students' motivation and subjective task value of participating in online and blended learning environments



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ABSTRACT

Online and blended learning (OBL) is intended for individualising education. However, while OBL attracts a diverse range of students, teachers lack insight into this diversity, which hinders them in anticipating students' individual needs. The present mixed methods' study examines the reasons and values that students in a teacher training programme in higher education attribute to their participation in OBL. Firstly, three motivational profiles were distinguished. Furthermore, the students value the flexibility and the face-to-face moments in OBL. However, based upon students' current experiences, costs - seen as negative aspects of OBL - seem to emerge. While students mainly mention costs regarding education in general (e.g. a high workload), they also indicate specific costs concerning OBL (e.g. harder to organise group work). A cost-value balance affects students' decisions to persist. Therefore, this study provides the values and costs that teachers should bear in mind for each profile.

1. Introduction

Online and blended learning (OBL) is increasingly used (Graham, Woodfield & Harrison, 2013) because it creates more flexible learning opportunities for students. The fully online instruction or the combination of online and face-to-face instruction (i.e. blended learning) (Boelens, Van Laer, De Wever & Elen, 2015), allows students to engage in learning at their own time, pace and place. However, the high student dropout rates in these environments raise concerns (Deschacht & Goeman, 2015; Rekenhof aan het Vlaamse Parlement, 2013). This elicited research into student factors that influence student persistence. One line of research indicates that it is important to understand students' motivation because it accounts for their engagement and success at school (Guay, Ratelle & Chanal, 2008; Lopéz-Pérez, Pérez-López & Rodríguez-Ariza, 2011). Since OBL environments provide independent learning with less face-to-face human support, motivational problems can cause students to be at risk of dropping out more easily (Cho & Jonassen, 2009; Fryer & Bovee, 2016).

Teachers and institutions should target the dropout by promoting students' motivation. This can be done by designing the pedagogy and the OBL environment in a way that aligns with students' needs and interests (Hegarty, 2011). Therefore, teachers need a clear understanding of, for instance, students' motivation why to participate in online or blended education (Fryer, Bovee & Nakao, 2014). According

to the expectancy-value theory of Wigfield and Eccles (2000), the subjective values students attribute to a task is a factor that shapes motivation. For example, attributing a low value to learning in an OBL environment could denote that the student is not convinced of the effectiveness of OBL and will be less motivated to learn and persist (Fryer, Bovee & Nakao, 2014). In a preliminary study, the authors (Vanslambrouck, Zhu, Tondeur, & Lombaerts, 2016) examined students' perceptions of the OBL environment and concluded that students mention freedom as a positive aspect and (lack of) interaction during distance moments as a negative aspect of OBL. The current research aims to explore these perceptions in more depth by examining the value they represent.

The open nature of OBL allows people with diverse previous work, life and educational experiences, to engage in education. This results in a heterogeneous group of online or blended learning students with a diversity of goals, motivations and expectations (Hegarty, 2011). This makes understanding the motivation and values of students a challenging task and may cause teachers to lack a clear view and knowledge of the diversity of students. Research is required that focuses on the diversity of students in the unique OBL environment, thereby addressing a gap in the current examined literature. Therefore, this study aims to explore the main motives of students to enrol in education in general, and the value they attribute to learning in online or blended education. The results of this study may assist teachers in the adjustment of their

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pedagogy and the OBL environment, to meet the needs of the students.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Motivation to participate: self-determination theory

Motivation is the driving force of students' choices and the extent of their engagement, effort and persistence in their learning process (Dörnye & Ushioda, 2011). In their self-determination theory (SDT), Deci and Ryan (2000) show that students can be motivated in different ways. The continuum of different kinds of motivations in the self-determination theory represents: (1) intrinsic motivation, which means that people learn for the pleasure they get out of it; (2) identified regulation, where individuals learn because it is personally relevant to them; (3) introjected regulation where people learn because they want to avoid shame or guilt; (4) external regulation, where people learn to obtain positive outcomes or avoid negative ones and (5) amotivation, where people lack motivation to learn or persist.

An extensive range of previous research on students' motivation to learn suggests that motivation is important for several student outcomes. For example, some researchers indicate that it explains students' performances (Hegarty, 2010; López-Pérez, Pérez-López & Rodríguez-Ariza, 2011; Yli-piipari & Kokkonen, 2014), predicts the persistence of students (Hegarty, 2011), or influences students' satisfaction with the course (Svanum & Aigner, 2011). Based upon the SDT, intrinsically motivated students seem to persist more and gain higher qualifications (Guay, Ratelle & Chanal, 2008; Rothes, Lemos & Gonçalves, 2014). In line with this, Fryer, Bovee and Nakao (2014) argue that students who are amotivated are more at risk of dropping out. Another example is the review of Reeve, Deci and Ryan (2004) in which a great deal of literature shows a link between autonomous regulation and positive outcomes like persistence and higher grades.

Some researchers go even further and prove that students can have a wide range of reasons to participate in education (e.g. Gorges, 2016) and can even have multiple motivations at once. Based on the aforementioned motivation types of Deci and Ryan (2000), Boiché and Stephan (2014) developed five motivational profiles of students, explored from a person-oriented approach: (1) the additive profile with high levels of intrinsic motivation, identified, introjected and external regulation; (2) the self-determined profile with above average levels of intrinsic motivation and identified regulation; (3) the moderate profile with above average levels of identified and external regulations; (4) the low profile with a mean score for amotivation and (5) the non-self-determined profile with above average scores for introjected regulation and high scores for external regulation and amotivation. They further state that these profiles have significant relevance with the grades of students, meaning that the motivation is an important aspect for success in an educational programme (Boiché & Stephan, 2014). The preliminary research of Vanslambrouck et al. (2016) showed that students are mostly motivated for controlled reasons but at the same time have multiple motives to enrol in education. Therefore, the current study uses motivational profiles, based on the SDT, to explore students' motivations.

2.2. Motivation in OBL: expectancy-value theory

The above-mentioned results for the influence of motivation on dropout and success in education raise awareness of the importance of motivation for OBL environments where dropout rates are considered high. Furthermore, motivation is especially important in OBL environments, where students get autonomy to learn independently with less teacher regulation or less face-to-face human support and interaction (Cho & Jonassen, 2009; Fryer & Bovee, 2016; Fryer, Bovee & Kaori, 2014).

The benefit of OBL is that teachers can personalise learning by adjusting their pedagogy and online environment to the motivation of the

students, which helps them perform at more personal levels (Hegarty, 2011). However, it is already complicated as students can have multiple motivations, but the heterogeneity of students in these OBL environments (Stavredes, 2011) poses an even bigger challenge for teachers, to clearly grasp the motivations of their students. Furthermore, teachers need to know more than just the reason or motivation why students learn. Hence, more research is needed that provides information about how students' motivation is shaped.

The expectancy-value theory of Wigfield and Eccles (2000) can provide a basis regarding how students' motivation is shaped and is therefore used in this study as the main theory. While the self-determination theory describes the motivations that affect the behavior of students, motivation itself is shaped by mental processes (Dörnye & Ushioda, 2011) which are conceptualised in the expectancy-value theory as the self-efficacy and the subjective task value of students. In this way, the expectancy-value theory and the SDT are linked, whereas the motivation of the SDT is considered as a reaction to the expectations of students and the value they attribute to their tasks (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002).

This is confirmed in the study of Lopéz-Pérez, Pérez-López and Rodríguez-Ariza (2011) who indicate that the perceptions of the students about the utility of e-learning are correlated with their motivation to attend classes. Furthermore, Deci and Ryan (2000) confirm this, by stating that self-efficacy is necessary for all sorts of motivation. Subsequently, Fryer, Bovee and Nakao (2014) argue that students who are amotivated are characterised with low self-efficacy and low task value.

The component of the subjective task value is composed of four kinds of values (Eccles et al., 1983). Applied to the current study, the 'task' of students is regarded as their participation in an online or blended course. Firstly, there is intrinsic value. This refers to the pleasure one has in participating or the subjective interest they have in their education and can be matched with intrinsic motivation. Secondly, if students find it personally important to do well during their participation, it refers to attainment value. This includes among other things the will to demonstrate their competences and to keep their dignity by avoiding shame and guilt. Thirdly, the utility value refers to the usefulness of participating; for instance, because it helps to attain future goals. This refers to extrinsic motivation. Fourthly, costs are also considered as values and refer to the negative aspects of participating in online or blended education (e.g. technology issues) (Vanslambrouck et al., 2016).

Additionally, prior research shows that expectancies (de Fátima Goulão, 2014; Fryer & Bovee, 2016) and values (Chiu & Wang, 2008) are significant predictors of students' intentions to persist in e-learning. However, Bandura (1986) states that students can have a high self-efficacy standard but still drop out, if they believe that their learning process is of low value and/or has too high costs. Nevertheless, research related to values in online and blended learning is scarce in comparison to that of self-efficacy. Therefore, this study focuses on the value students attribute to their learning process in the specific context of OBL. Furthermore, since studies that focus on value mostly ignore costs (Wigfield & Cambria, 2010); this study also considers costs that are attributed to the specific context of OBL.

3. Present research

Understanding the motivation of students with the aim of personalising their education is a challenging task in OBL environments, as students in OBL environments are very diverse. However, it is regarded as a first step towards reducing dropout rates, which can arise from a lack of success for students. Therefore, the current study has the aim of tackling this problem by firstly using the SDT for preliminary quantitative research on the diversity among students' motivations to participate in education. This is done by analysing the motivational profiles of students. Thus, the first research question in this study is:

What kind of motivational profiles can be identified among students

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