



Intervention in Online Writing Instruction: An Action-theoretical Perspective

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Abstract

This analysis argues for an interwoven perspective of motivation, engagement, agency, and action in Online Writing Instruction (OWI) compiled from shared elements of empirical research in online education, writing instruction, and especially student academic engagement in traditional classrooms, where the research domain is comparatively mature. *Engagement* is the common element shared by these domains. In online education research, engagement is sometimes understood through intentional student actions. In writing instruction, engagement is commonly understood through human agency. In academic settings, engagement can be seen as a foundational part of Self-Determination Theory, which is comprised of cognitive, behavioral, and emotional engagement (Deci and Ryan, 1985). Educators often find measures of engagement valuable because they are reliable predictors of student outcomes, and they suggest a reasonable point of intervention for struggling students. A measure of agentic engagement, which describes the extent to which a student exerts agency to personalize a learning experience, could add value to measures of engagement, especially in OWI where actions and agency are integral to student success. In addition, a focus on engagement and intervention/remediation may offer an opportunity for students to succeed in learning online, not just in OWI, which is a valued skill in the workplace.

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1. Introduction

In this paper, we explore an action-theoretical model of engagement comprised of cognitive, behavioral, emotional, and *agentic* engagement where agentic engagement may add to the predictive power of Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) in both online education and writing instruction. Agentic engagement may help clarify power and control in the classroom as well as contribute to an understanding of how student voices are heard, which can help teachers and administrators understand student experiences and perspectives (Reeve & Tseng, 2011; Yazzie-Mintze, 2010). Because online education and student reading/writing are highly agentic actions, both measurement and application of agentic engagement in online writing instruction are important to student success. The action-theoretical

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model, with its action perspective, suggests that the most successful interventions occur where variables affecting student outcomes are alterable (Fredricks, Blumenfeldt, & Paris, 2004). To this end, an action-theoretical model of engagement may facilitate successful interventions in online writing instruction by providing an early warning system, framing effective interventions, and supporting “learning to learn” in online education.

2. Engagement in the action-theoretical model of SDT

2.1. Self-determination theory: Motivation, engagement, and actions

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is a framework through which educators may be able to reliably predict the motivation a student feels toward academic tasks. According to SDT, humans are active and growth-oriented organismic creatures; therefore, human actions are inclined toward satisfying three fundamental growth-oriented needs: autonomy (the need to control oneself and one’s destiny), competence (the need to feel effective in the social and physical world), and relatedness (the need to belong) (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Humans are motivated to satisfy these needs through actions of varying intensities, measured by engagement.

Engagement in SDT describes the nature and intensity of actions that mediate human contexts and outcomes. In fact, a research study by Connell and Wellborn (1991) found engagement to be *the* mediator between a student’s context and their outcomes. The study originated in the newly developed Self-System Model of Motivational Development in which student engagement was found to be optimized if the three fundamental organismic needs of SDT (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) are met. This finding was later supported by other researcher studies including Appleton, Christenson, Kim, & Reschly, 2006; Fredricks et al., 2004; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Patrick, Skinner, & Connell, 1993; Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Skinner, Kindermann, & Furrer, 2009a; Skinner, Kindermann, Connell, & Wellborn, 2009b; and Reeve & Tseng, 2011.

Fundamental needs in an action-theoretical model of SDT are satisfied through human actions. Human actions in SDT are not simply behaviors; instead, they are defined though an action perspective (Brandtstadter, 1998), which suggests they are part of a larger motivational system that includes the agent (i.e., the self), the intentional behavior (the action), the desired end (the goal), and a way to mediate between the agent and the goal (Skinner, Chapman, & Baltes, 1988a; Skinner, Chapman, & Baltes, 1988b). Therefore, a human action is a behavior (a physical gesture) plus the emotions, intentions, and goals associated with it (Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, & Kindermann, 2008; Skinner et al., 2009b; Skinner et al., 2009a; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). Take, for example, the behavior of two students raising a hand during class. They are exhibiting the same observable behavior, yet one student’s goal could be to add to the class discussion, while another’s could be to obtain permission to leave the room. The construct of action allows a distinction between these same behaviors. Thus, according to SDT, engagement manifests in action and is driven by fundamental human needs. There are other motivational theories besides SDT (Wigfield, Eccles, Roeser, & Schiefele, 2008a), but they all have, as a set of target actions, descriptors of engagement, so it could be said that some type of engagement is present in all motivational theories, even when not specified (Skinner et al., 2009).

2.2. Online education: Actions and engagement

The *actions* of the SDT model play an especially large role in online education, but their definition is less clear than in face-to-face education. In online education, observable intentional behavior may be particularly high compared to observable unintentional behavior. For example, logging on to a learning management system (LMS), downloading a document, submitting a document for review, and posting to an online discussion board are all observable, intentional actions; however, the student emotions about the actions are unobservable and, thus, unclear. In addition, it is unclear whether course-related *non-verbal* behaviors such as hand gestures, tone of voice, or body movements meet the definition of an action because they are not observable even though there may be course-related emotions, intentions, and goals associated with them. For example, in the case of an online student failing to submit an assignment to the class Dropbox, the emotions, intentions, and goals associated with this action can be less obvious than when a student in a face-to-face course comes to class with incomplete homework. According to SDT, the behaviors in the online course would be actions, but fewer of their attributes are known. These ambiguities can make intervention difficult, and the extent to which online learning strains (or even invalidates) the action-theoretical nature of an SDT model is unclear.

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