



# Linking counter-knowledge to goal orientation through an unlearning context — A study from a Spanish University

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## ABSTRACT

The performance of higher education students may be explained by characteristics of both the academic and social environment in the classroom. The environments provided by classrooms to facilitate learning among students can be seen as useful vehicles for creating shared narratives to transfer gossip, lies, exaggeration and partial truths (i.e. counter-knowledge). This paper focuses on unlearning as a context to counteract the problem of counter-knowledge. The relationships between an unlearning context and counter-knowledge are analysed by using an empirical study of 210 undergraduate students in order to identify whether there is a significant impact on student's goal orientation by unlearning. Our results confirm that counter-knowledge is a variable that, when controlled, has the effect of strengthening the relationship between unlearning and student's goal orientation. However, when left uncontrolled, the relationship between unlearning and student's goal orientation is weaker than it otherwise would be.

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## 1. Introduction

De la Fuente (2004) refers to academic goals as motives of an academic nature that students use to guide their classroom behaviour. There are many factors other than instruction that can influence how students actually perform. For example, “counter-knowledge” often masquerades scientific knowledge, even though it can be proved to be untrue in reference to known facts and/or shown to lack appropriate supporting evidence. Indeed, the very lack of supporting evidence is sometimes used to create a shared non-reliable truth of a particular statement — for example the statement that a cure for cancer exists (Thompson, 2008).

Counter-knowledge is created when individuals create inappropriate or incorrect interpretations of certain events or sequences of facts. Rumours, gossip, unsupported explanations and justifications, as well as inappropriate or false beliefs are just several examples that illustrate students' capacity to create and share counter-knowledge in the classroom (Harvey & Lusch, 1999). However, as acknowledged in previous literature, counter-knowledge, generated via rumour, gossip, exaggeration and the acceptance of partial truths, is not always necessarily bad (Baumeister, Zhang, & Vohs, 2004; Van der Veeke, 2014) and, thus, it may be controlled and handled. For example, Baumeister et al. (2004) and Banerjee, Chandrasekhar, and Jackson (2014) argue that gossip is useful for conveying information to others, for social influence and for

entertainment. Such anecdotes may also be useful to explain how culture and society operate (Dunbar, 1996; Fox, 2001).

The considerations above imply that counter-knowledge may lead students to develop a world-view that, although it is at most partially true, is useful, since it is an important form of social communication which serves to bond people together (Baumeister et al., 2004). Nonetheless, in order to get the most from counter-knowledge, it is necessary to create or promote an active unlearning context to handle and critically examine counter-knowledge.

The relevant contribution of the unlearning context is its ability to prepare the ground for the process of correcting incorrect assumptions necessary to improve students' relationships with teachers' and therefore potentially also improves student performance (Cianciolo et al., 2006). Developing an unlearning context in higher education institutions may increase students' performance, not only by questioning previous tacit knowledge or statements (Matthew & Sternberg, 2009), but also by creating a learning environment that motivates students to participate. In turn, this may help the students to achieve academic goals.

In an attempt to cover the above-mentioned research gaps and based on previous literature, this paper develops a research model to analyse several relationships between counter-knowledge, an unlearning context and students' goal orientations (SGO) in higher education. More specifically, the research questions that motivated this work are as follows: 1) “How does the unlearning context affect SGO?”; 2) “Can an unlearning context enhance SGO?”; 3) “Is there a negative relationship between counter-knowledge and SGO?”; and 4) “How does counter-knowledge affect SGO in the presence of an unlearning context?”. The next section describes in detail the theoretical

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frameworks that characterise counter-knowledge and an unlearning context.

## 2. Conceptual framework

### 2.1. Students' goal orientation (SGO)

Goal orientation theory defines achievement goals as someone's motivation for engaging in task achievement (e.g. Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Maehr, 1989; Nicholls, 1989; Weiner, 1990). The Regulatory Focus Theory (RFT) views motivation in a way that allows an understanding of the basic way someone approaches a task or a goal (Higgins, 1997). RFT has emerged as a major research framework in motivational research (e.g. Nie & Liem, 2013; Shu & Lam, 2011; Watling, Driessen, van der Vleuten, Vanstone, & Lingard, 2012), and assumes that students' perceptions of the classroom's goal structure influence their own personal attitude to goals, as well as other important educational outcomes. Students should be empowered to be productive, organised, responsible, and self-directed individuals (Higgins, 2000).

RFT proposes that motivational strength is enhanced when the manner in which people work toward a goal sustains their regulatory orientation (Spiegel, Grant-Pillow, & Higgins, 2004). Thus, teachers who foster positive relationships with their students create classroom environments more conducive to learning, enhancing the achievement of both academic and emotional needs (Daniels & Perry, 2003; Berry & O'Connor, 2009). In this regard, Higgins (1997) contributed to the development of the RFT by proposing the existence of two subsets of goal orientation: promotion focus and prevention focus. This framework points out that promotion-focused students strive to realise their ideals, but they are sensitive to the presence or absence of positive outcomes, while prevention-focused students attempt to fulfil their duties and obligations, although they are sensitive to the presence or absence of negative outcomes (ELSamen, 2011).

The above two dimensions depict the importance of an individual's own ideals and obligations as well as what other people expect from them (Higgins, 1997). Taking into account ELSamen's (2011); Lockwood, Jordan, and Kunda's (2002) and Shu and Lam (2011) works, this study considers that promotion and prevention orientations are dominant on those who follow a goal orientation (Higgins, 1997). This approach to the RFT has been used previously in literature relating to consumer behaviour by analysing the impact of the RFT on students' responses (e.g. Shu & Lam, 2011; Zhao & Pechmann, 2007).

### 2.2. Counter-knowledge

All so-called "knowledge" generated within a classroom is not necessarily good knowledge (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). For example, inappropriate or false beliefs generated via unsupported belief, rumour and gossip are just some of the examples that illustrate students' propensity to create and accept partial truths and even outright falsehoods. As a result, students actively construct and assimilate beliefs and assumptions they consider are true when, in fact, they may be incorrect (Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). As Chapman and Ferfolja (2001) point out, gossip, rumours and malicious lies proliferate in the learning process and people can be manipulated and end up learning some 'wrong' things.

Thompson defines counter-knowledge as 'misinformation packaged to look like fact' (2008: p.1). Thus, based on previous literature, counter-knowledge is based on false statements, gossip, rumours and even lies, which may lead to the adoption of inappropriate or outdated assumptions (Thompson, 2008; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). It is worth noting here the difference between counter-knowledge creation and counter-knowledge. The former refers to a learning process that entails being good at transferring unverified information from one context to another (Cegarra, Cepeda, & Wensley, 2015), while the latter relates to gossip, malicious rumours and malicious stories created as a result of this

process (Sanchez-Casado, Cegarra, & Tomasetti, 2015). Put another way, while the counter-knowledge creation process is the free flow of unverified information, counter-knowledge is the result of this process, which may affect to third parties (e.g. staff members) and may involve many complex misunderstandings (Sanchez-Casado et al., 2015). This paper will therefore focus on our consideration that "counter-knowledge" refers to the flaws in students' mental models (e.g. misperceptions and misinformation) that arise from rumours or unverified information that may hinder student-institution relations.

The considerations above imply that counter-knowledge potentially leads to a degradation of learned knowledge (Darr, Argote, & Eppe, 1995). That is because counter-knowledge generally involves the provision of unverified information by one agent to another about a third (Thompson, 2008; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). For example, when classroom members take for granted in their relationships wrong statements that are derived from unsupported evidence, rumour or gossip, the learning process is undermined. This study suggests that counter-knowledge is simply the sharing of unverified news and the process through which users catch up. It is the verbal communication as part of social grooming, through which people maintain relationships (e.g. Gambetta, 1994; Dunbar, 1996).

### 2.3. Linking counter-knowledge with SGO though unlearning

Unlearning involves the giving up or abandonment of knowledge, values or behaviours (Akgün, Lynn, & Byrne, 2003, 2006; Akgün, Byrne, Lynn, & Keskin, 2007). Previous studies report that the term 'unlearning' may be considered to describe a process of clearing out old routines and beliefs that no longer meet current challenges (Tsang & Zabra, 2008). This process of unlearning may be facilitated by the creation of a context in the classroom, whereby students grow and change in response to dealing with novel situations that create a mismatch (King & Kitchener, 1994) or induce destabilisations of old learning (Piaget, 1964) into their routine ways of responding (Pighin & Marzona, 2011). Cegarra and Sanchez (2008) propose that organisational structures and factors that facilitate the changing of individual habits support individual unlearning (i.e. awareness, relinquishing), while organisational structures and factors which consolidate emergent understandings support "relearning" at the organisational level.

Several approaches can be adopted to address counter-knowledge. On the one hand, counter-knowledge is considered as undesirable knowledge that interferes with knowledge needed by students in the classroom. From this perspective, counter-knowledge which thrives on mistruths, exaggeration and malicious lies may be considered to be negatively associated with student goals as a result of: 1) narrowing student's cognitive process; 2) hindering students' ability to plan, reason, and understand the situation effectively; 3) putting someone/something down based on students' preconceived perceptions; and 4) limiting students' prior knowledge of interactions with new technologies and their consequences (Chapman & Ferfolja, 2001). For example, many online social networks allow different ways of communication like posts on user's personal pages, possibly resulting in their friends forwarding the news, despite it being inaccurate, or unverified (Sanchez-Casado et al., 2015).

On the other hand, counter-knowledge can provoke doubts about the efficacy and appropriateness of some student's mental models and with respect to aspects of knowledge shared among the students and classroom environments. From this perspective, counter-knowledge could reveal potentially useful information about how classrooms and students operate. As City, Elmore, Fiarman, and Teitel (2009) pointed out "teachers often have to take off their evaluating glasses and look with fresh eyes what is happening in and across classrooms". In this vein, Ben-Ze'ev (1994) noted that one primary indicator of gossip is to allow people access to information about others' personal and intimate lives (information to which they would not otherwise be privy), with

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