

Commentary

Classroom and technology-supported help seeking: The need for converging research paradigms

Stuart A. Karabenick*

Combined Program in Education and Psychology, University of Michigan, 1400D School of Education, 610 E. University, Ann Arbor, MI 48109, USA

Abstract

Contributions to this special section represent advances in understanding help seeking as a self-regulated learning strategy that occurs in classrooms, during computer-mediated communications, and when using intelligent systems that provide help to improve learners' help-seeking skills and knowledge acquisition. Collectively, the research and development contributes information relevant for all phases of the help-seeking process. My comments focus on: (a) features of technology-supported help seeking that have implications for motivation, (b) the need for increased attention to the instructional context in which technology-supported help seeking occurs, (c) a necessary convergence of classroom and technology-supported help-seeking research paradigms, and (d) reconsideration of help seeking as a social-interactive strategy.
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Keywords: Classroom context; Help-seeking; Information and communication technology (ICT); Motivation; Social interaction

1. Introduction

Following Nelson-Le Gall's (1981, 1987) explication of instrumental help seeking that is intended to promote learning and understanding, in contrast to executive help seeking designed to avoid work, it has become abundantly clear that help seeking can be an important strategy of self-regulated learners (Pintrich & Zusho, 2002; Zimmerman, 2008; Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons, 1990). Several proposed models describe the steps, or stages, of the help-seeking process (e.g., Gross & McMullen, 1983; Nelson-Le Gall, 1981), including a model that specifies the behaviors and decisions that define adaptive or ideal help seeking (Newman, 2000). All models incorporate the metacognitive processing involved in determining the presence of problems and recognition of the need for help, perceived benefits and costs of seeking and not seeking help, help-seeking goals (instrumental or executive), selection among sources of assistance, and obtaining and processing help.

There is now considerable evidence that motivationally adaptive self-regulated learners are more rather than less likely to seek instrumental help (Karabenick, 2003; Karabenick & Knapp, 1991; Karabenick & Newman, 2009; Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons, 1990). Effective help seeking is also more likely in contexts where the focus is on learning and understanding rather than on ability and interpersonal comparisons (Karabenick, 2004; Turner et al., 2002). Person characteristics and features of the context can impact all phases of the process, but especially the perceived costs and benefits of seeking help. In addition to the costs involved in the time and effort required to seek help, a potentially more consequential cost is the self-threat that accompanies acknowledging one's need for help and the embarrassment of its public disclosure. Self-threat is thought to be responsible for low rates of seeking needed help (Karabenick & Newman, 2009; Ryan, Pintrich, & Midgley, 2001), although as Butler (1998) observed, persons with a learning orientation to help seeking may also refrain from doing so if they believe working independently is the best strategy.

Help seeking has been studied in cooperative learning groups (Kempler & Linnenbrink, 2006; Webb, Ing, Kersting, & Nemer, 2006), in organizational settings (Sandoval & Lee,

* Tel.: +1 734 6470611; fax: +1 734 6152164.

E-mail address: skaraben@umich.edu.

2006), in teachers (Butler, 2007; Butler & Shibaz, 2008), and in different cultures (Schwalb & Sukemune, 1998; Volet & Karabenick, 2006). Beginning over two decades ago (Keefer & Karabenick, 1998), there has been a steady increase in help seeking supported by information and communications technologies (ICT). These technologies include cognitive tutoring systems and various forms of computer-mediated communication that provide access to myriad sources of information. The rapid growth of information and easy access create both opportunities and challenges for learners, as described in a recent special issue of *Computers and Education* (Rouet & Puustinen, 2009; also Puustinen & Rouet, 2009). As will be emphasized here, most technology-focused studies are primarily concerned with cognitive and meta-cognitive dynamics, whereas social-motivational issues have dominated research on help seeking in classrooms. Accordingly, the discussion of contributions to this special section will include identifying points of overlap between these literatures and the benefits to be gained from their more complete convergence.

2. Contributions to this special section

2.1. Motivational influences on help seeking and avoidance

The study by Ryan and Shin (2011) represents another installment of Ryan's exploration of help seeking and students' approach to social relations that essentially parallel achievement goals in the social domain (Ryan & Shim, 2006). Social demonstration-approach and social demonstration-avoidance goals, similar to social status goals (Ryan & Pintrich, 1998), are the social equivalent of performance-approach and performance-avoidance achievement goals, respectively. Help seeking is generally related to performance-avoidance rather than performance-approach achievement goals (Karabenick, 2003, 2004; Ryan, Patrick, & Shim, 2005). Ryan and Shin (2011), however, found that demonstration-approach, rather than demonstration-avoidance, predicted help seeking. In addition to the explanation they proffer, it would be critical to examine how they operationalize social demonstration-avoidance. That process should include cognitive interviewing to determine how students interpreted the scale items (i.e., their cognitive validity) and thus provide additional information regarding the scale's construct validity (Karabenick et al., 2007). Information that the respondents' construal of items on that scale differs from their intended meaning would suggest revising the items, reconsideration of the construct assessed (social demonstration-avoidance), or possibly both.

As Ryan and Shin (2011) note, despite evidence that teacher and student reports of help-seeking behavior are related, there is considerable unaccounted for variance (Ryan et al., 2005). This invites speculation about teacher ratings in the present study, including how teachers and students may have differed in their interpretations of similar help-seeking behavior. Ryan and Shin (2011) clearly believe that teachers

are more accurate, stating that “teacher reports of observable behavior are more appropriate than student self-reports to investigate this conceptualization of help seeking...” (p. 249). Nevertheless, they admit the presence of the observer dilemma that “A teacher might think the student doesn't ask for help because of low motivation or effort, whereas the student might not ask for help because they do not perceive the teacher as supportive or even insightful when approached for help” (p. 255). To this one could add that teachers must infer the students' need for help to properly interpret the absence of help seeking, which renders the absence of help seeking more difficult to interpret than its presence. It is worth adding that, from a social-cognitive perspective, neither teachers' nor students' judgments are more correct, but that students and teachers are describing help seeking from their own vantage points. One suggestion for future research would be to employ stimulated recall by teachers and students of the same classroom interactions to examine the ways in which their interpretations of help-seeking episodes differ.

Ryan and Shin (2011) suggest additional research on how teachers respond to helping requests, which echoes previous work on how college students' views of their instructors affect help seeking (Karabenick & Sharma, 1994). Also important would be further studies of how teachers' ratings of student help seeking relates to their own help-seeking orientations and other teacher characteristics, including their achievement goals (Butler, 2007; Butler & Shibaz, 2008). Finally, more focus is warranted on how teachers respond to help-seeking requests, as part of the overall classroom climate and achievement goal structure, for which there is considerable evidence regarding its effects on help seeking (Turner et al., 2002).

2.2. Introducing technology into the classroom

Mäkitalo-Siegl, Kohnle, and Fischer (2011) provide an excellent example of how the context of ICT can influence help seeking during web-based inquiry learning, specifically the degree to which teachers provide structure. Although they found that ICT was clearly beneficial in terms of learning gains, they were discouraged by the low rate of help seeking, especially requests for instrumental help. Their detailed analysis of the screen and audio-capture videos revealed insights about how the classroom scripts influenced students' use of the web-based inquiry system available to them, and why students in the high structure condition used less help but learned more than did students provided with less structure. As the authors point out, students in the high structure condition were provided with more scaffolding both in inquiry learning and help seeking than were students in low structure classrooms, who were required to discover the advantages of that strategy on their own.

It is important to point out that the teacher was instructed to follow the classroom script that was assigned but was given no other information about how to interact with the student dyads, just to remain available during the sessions by walking around. Accordingly, the teacher in the high structure condition spent

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