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EFFECTIVE LEARNING AND LEARNING SATISFACTION, IN AN ACADEMIC CONTEXT-DISCUSSION CONCERNING AN INTEGRATING MODEL

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ABSTRACT

The present paper intends to open a discussion on effective learning, in an academic context, by introducing a concept that has not often enough been highlighted as a potent factor in explaining academic performance and the probability of its iteration. Effective learning means, on one hand, getting the highest performance at the lowest costs (in terms of resource- time, effort, money- consume) possible. On the other hand, learning becomes truly effective when it generates positive feelings and favorable attitudes towards it. That is because the positive allure surrounding the process of learning creates the right premises for a (repeat) performance, ensuring individual's involvement and proactive behavior in the learning situation. This paper also presents a model of academic learning, trying to encompass the relevant factors involved in the process and their complex relationships, in a circuit with a double-loop regulatory action: from learning outcomes to student's psychological variables and from learning outcomes to instructional strategies and teaching behavior

KEYWORDS: academic learning, attitude, effective learning, learning model, learning satisfaction

1. INTRODUCTION

The interest shown for the optimization of teaching techniques as to increase the efficiency of learning among students, either adults or pre-adults, is all too present and legitimate. The difficulty lies in the defining of "effective learning" and turning this key-concept into a plain operational variable. Before engaging into a discussion about an integrating learning model, I find it useful to review some ideas regarding effective learning, psychological factors relating to effectiveness in the learning process, and shedding light on the learning satisfaction concept that I have used as an explanatory part of the model. Starting from this point, I plan to create an integrated view of how learning (especially in adults) takes place, what factors can be considered as potentially influential and how are the factors linked in order to produce and regulate the process.

2. EFFECTIVE LEARNING

The process of acquiring and using knowledge has always been a central point of investigation, mainly because it is plenary involved in all of our major or minor endeavors and daily activities, serving as a condition for social and professional adaptation. Following Fry, Ketteridge și Marshall (2009), learning involves things like handling abstract principals, understanding arguments and evidence, memorising facts, acquiring methods, techniques and developing ways to approach things and people, recognizing and reasoning, debating ideas or forming behaviours best fitted for specific situations (p.8). In a more specific sense, *academic learning* is about the depth of approach (deep or surface approach-Marton and Saljo, 1997), about the way teacher's perception and concepts regarding learning link to students'perception (Trigwell, Prosser și Waterhouse, 1999), it's also about students', teachers'and teaching characteristics with aditional influences from department characterstics (Entwistle, 2000) or about learning through actively experiencing reality (Kolb, 1975, in Fry, Ketteridge și Marshall, 2009). Murphy and Alexander (2006) talk about five dimensions of academic learning, among which (p.4): development (changes in the individual that occur as result of experience over time); motivation/ affect („a state that energizes and directs behaviours"); situation/context (environmental and social factors such as „ability grouping; socioeconomic status"). On that note, learning, as the "multilayered process that proceeds from developing one's understanding of pieces of knowledge, to a growing awareness of our own personhood, and to a capacity to shape the world" (Walker, 2006, p.69), becomes *truly* effective when it answers in a positive manner to all of the following questions (in a non-random order):

- Is it interesting? Do I feel intrigued by what I am learning/about to learn?
- Is it effort- worthy? Do I feel that it's worth putting in all the effort to succeed?
- Is it time-effective? Am I getting things fast enough to feel I'm progressing?
- Is it productive? Can/Did I obtain the results (in terms of knowledge, skills and competence) I am/was expecting?
- Is it properly rewarded? Can/Did I obtain the recognition (in terms of diploma and social awareness) I am/was counting on?
- Is it cost-effective? Do I think that I'm paying the right/fair price (price= money, stress, time etc.) for it?
- Is it satisfying? Do I feel good and enthusiastic about learning in itself, do I feel accomplished just by learning *this* something?

Of course, other factors or questions besides the above can be added. But the base elements of effectiveness rest: *interest, perseverance, metacognition, self-management (time management, stress management)* and *self-directed learning,*

learning satisfaction. Motivation, in its intrinsic form, ensures interest that leads to a deep-approach to learning (Ramsden, 2003), meaning a logical approach with results in a better understanding of things, a long-term recall of details and higher capacity of using and integrating information. The deep-approach is also connected to the learning satisfaction, in a sense that "it is a much more satisfying way to study as it allows students to use academic knowledge to control and clarify the world outside academic knowledge" (Ramsden, 2003, p.60). Regarding metacognition, it implies three major aspects (Pintrich, 1999): planning, monitoring and regulation, as strategic behaviours that mediate the interaction between the individual and the knowledge to be acquired. A metacognitive conduct means being permanently aware of your learning behavior and learning peculiarities, in an effort to improve the process. This awareness brings a unique advantage: being able to correct misunderstandings as you learn, during and not after, focusing on the difficulties as they arise and dealing with problems first-handed, with the highest degree of control and management on your learning that you can possibly have. That leads to high quality, effective learning, by using time and effort in a smart way, while exercising perseverance, attention and focus (much needed when learning for the long run!). Self-directed learning draws on factors such as environmental factors, prior experience related factors, individual psychological factors (e.g. self-assurance, perseverance, learning style etc.), content related factors and factors pertaining to the learning offer (Siebert, 2001). Self-directed learning is not just a superior form of self-management, but also a premises for effective learning. I base this affirmation on Biggs (1999)'s wonderfully true statement regarding the learner's activity: "Being active while learning is better than being inactive: activity is a good in itself" (p.76), which reiterates the idea that behaving as an active participant to the learning process enhances the chances of getting a sense of control over things. This means dealing with trial, error and success in a strategic manner, therefore managing your own efficiency in learning in a particular way, becoming just right for yourself and your learning needs. As for learning satisfaction, it will be approached later on, in a more detailed manner.

Working with the concept of learning by only using its lucrative sense, the outcomes-oriented perspective, is overall narrow and unproductive. The broader perspective on effective learning requires taking into consideration the qualitative, interpretative and contextual side, the mellow-fluid factor that influences activities in mere predictable, but important, decisive ways: *the motivational and attitudinal complex* (with accent on the powerful emotional flavor of the complex) of the people involved in learning (learners and teachers, together). Firstly, I call it the fluid factor because it cannot be precisely determined and measured, given its socially-dependent nature and thus the person's need to keep it socially acceptable (when asked about what she/he

believes and feels about things and situations, a person will give the desirable answers instead of the true ones). Secondly, the complex is mellow not because it lack substance, but because it lacks the sharp, solid borders to hold its specific substance. Attitudes and motives are made of cognitive, emotional and volitive ingredients, some of them *unconsciously* determining behavior, with personal unique seasoning that comes from internalized prior experiences. The quantities, proportions and combinations are highly variable, therefore the final product is ever to be investigated and (re)defined.

3. LEARNING SATISFACTION

In order to put together a model starting from how academic learning takes place, one must identify and analyze what factors are involved and how do they coordinate. It's not quite innovative to state that cognitive factors are a major determinant when it comes to learning outcomes, and that people with a high level of intellectual development perform better than people with lower levels, in learning activities. This is a proven fact. The debate starts when we ask the questions: How much do the non-intellectual factors, such as motivation and attitudes, influences the individual's learning process and outcomes, and in what way? How important are those factors in determining learning performance? More or less important than the intellectual ones? What is their influence depending on? These are not easy-to-answer questions, and I'm not sure that there are single answers for each of them. What we do know, nevertheless, is that motivation and attitudes play a very significant part in learning and that taking them into account is not only highly recommended, but mandatory.

Learning satisfaction can be described in terms of an emotional complex, as the level of joy the individual feels when learning (Long, 1985), the degree of coherence perceived by a person, and converted into affective response, between his/her expectation and his/her experience with the situation (Martin, 1988). Also, learning satisfaction is placed first, by students, in terms of desirable and sought out results when engaging in a learning activity, second being the learning outcomes (in Chang and Chang, 2012). Satisfaction is seen as a "spontaneous experience" associated with intrinsically motivated behaviors (Deci, Ryan and Williams, 1996), that comes from learner-centered and need-oriented learning activities, while Harvey, Locke and Morey (2002) define learning satisfaction as the pleasure resulted from the student being involved in specific curricular activities designed to consider the learning needs experienced by the student (in Chang and Chang, 2012). In their research on the matter, the authors (Chien, 2007; Chang and Chang, 2012; Khiat, 2013) have concluded on the multifaceted aspect of the learning satisfaction, analyzing a number of factors that pertain to the construct. After studying the factors mentioned in the research on the subject, we have retained a number of six

relevant and reliable factors pertaining to the learning satisfaction construct (individual characteristics; material conditions and learning facilities; the teacher and the instructional activity; learning outcomes; learning environment; peer relationships) and we have designed the SLSQ (Students' Learning Satisfaction Questionnaire), an instrument we used to measure the learning satisfaction and tested under validity (EFA study) and reliability (alpha Cronbach coefficient, for each of the six dimensions, and for the whole scale (Topală and Tomozii, 2014). Learning satisfaction (measured through SLSQ) has been proven to be associated with adult students' attitudes regarding learning aspects and self-efficiency (e.g. Adult students that believe learning is best done alone obtain higher scores in learning satisfaction; Adult students that declare themselves interested in what is taught in faculty rate higher scores in learning satisfaction; Adult students that believe that actively searching new information and trying to find new learning opportunities for yourself is important in life, also score high in learning satisfaction) (Topală, 2014), showing that the non-intellectual factors taken into account in the learning process connect in various, constantly under investigation ways.

4. AN INTEGRATING LEARNING MODEL

Studying different models designed to explain academic learning (Entwistle, 1981; Marton and Saljo, 1997; Trigwell, Prosser și Waterhouse, 1999; Biggs, 1999; Entwistle, 2000; Ramsden, 2003) led me to believe that, besides frequently and widely invoked factors such as intellectual characteristics, motivation, level of anxiety and self concepts, the learner's way of perceiving the educational situation and environment, his/her prior experience with learning, his/her attitudes towards learning are very important elements in influencing his/her learning conduct or complex learning behavior which results in `hard` (grades) and `soft` (satisfaction) outcomes.

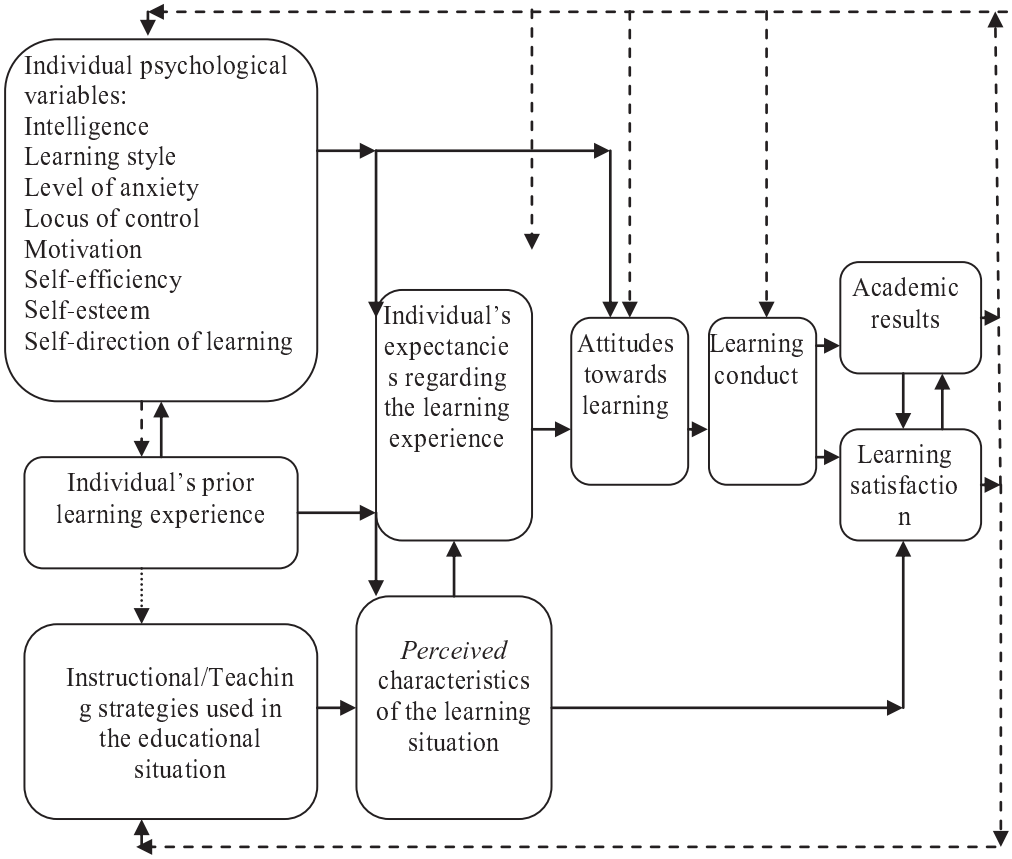

Fig 1. Academic learning model

As shown in Fig. 1, academic learning starts from the individual's psychological parameters, which are influenced by prior learning experiences that the individual sets as the foundation of his/her expectations and attitudes towards learning. Among the individual variables that influence academic learning we can identify *self-direction of learning*, which Lounsbury et al. (2009) demonstrate to be a personality trait positively associated with satisfaction with faculty and satisfaction with life in general. Self-direction of learning involves a person's initiative to control his/her own learning process, to independently decide and autonomously take action where learning is concerned. At the starting point, we also find the instructional strategies that the teacher presents and uses from the beginning of the educational sequence. The student perceives the learning situation in an individualized way, uniquely influenced by his/her psychological set and prior learning experiences. These perceived characteristics of the learning situation influence the individual's expectations regarding the learning experience, together with his/her prior learning experience and his/her psychological variables that create the big picture on what to generally expect and how things will most probably evolve.

Expectations are also influenced by individual's characteristics and his/her prior experiences, and help determine the way a person relates to a situation. In other words, expectations have a major rol in influencing attitudes, along side with the individual's personality set. Furthermore, attitudes towards learning determine the learning behaviours to be adopted, in a sense that the individual will act according to what he/she belives pertaining to learning (learning conditions, learning environment, learning context, learning opportunities etc.), the others (teacher, peer-group) and the self (self-confidence, self-esteem etc.). The learning behaviour or learning conduct a student will adopt differes according to his/her belives and knowledge regarding the most effective way to proceed. In a best case scenario, the learning conduct is self-directed, which means that the student undertakes activities through a deep-approach to learning, by actively engaging in the learning process, often using smart learning techinques (effective reading, asking questions regarding the new information in order to check the level of understanding, highlighting text, finding key-words, re-formulating ideas, etc.) and permanently displaying the right attitude for effective learning (reflecting on new ideas, arguing believes- including his/her own!, thirstly searching for answers, challenging perennial theories and truths, creating original models- no matter how bold!, ever curious, ever open to knowledge and change). At the end of the line, considering all the factors previously mentioned as potentially influential and linked together, the student learning behaviour produces results, in terms of academic outcomes and learning satisfaction. Learning satisfaction comes not only from what the student does (learning conduct or academic results), but also form what the student perceives as characterstics of the instructional situation or educational setting. The academic results and learning satisfaction are assumed to be strongly and positively correlated, meaning that a high level of satisfaction coresponde to a high level of performance in learning. From the outcomes starts the second circuit of links (marked in Fig.1 with discontinued-line arrows) indicating a regulatory action of the learning results on attitudes, expectations, personality variables, on the student's side (one loop), and on instructional strategies, on the teacher's side (another loop).

5. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In an attempt to bring together explanatory or `simply` influential factors pertaining to the academic learning, a somewhat eclectic model of learning came to life. It is far from complete and does not claim to have found (all) the right answers in the matter at hand. Placing importance on a rather volatile concept such as the learning satisfaction is a challenge that comes with risks and gains. The risks reside in the very complex and thus hard to define and manipulate, for research reasons, nature/structure of the construct, which impels to caution when measuring it and methodologically operating with it.

Nevertheless, the gains or benefits seem to outdo the risks, in quantity and quality. The benefits come from the fact that considering learning satisfaction as a powerful factor in explaining effective learning and trying to circumscribe its denotation (while clarifying its connotations) is a step forward in better understanding the reasons behind the individuals' decisions concerning the engagement and involvement in various learning activities or the lack of it. And it's fair to say that involvement in learning activities is one fundamental condition for the effectiveness of the learning and teaching processes.

The current paper intends to be an intermediary point in approaching effective learning and discussing the elements of academic learning in a connected manner. This means that, in the learning equation, intelligence and attitude, learning style and expectations, academic results and learning satisfaction become joint ventures, shedding a communal light on why and how academic learning takes place.

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