

Engaging the first-year students during the pandemic - an exploratory study using a mixed method approach

A/Prof PH Ong¹ & Dr Tan Chin Pei²

¹Health and Social Sciences Cluster, SIT; ²CoLead, SIT

Introduction

Academic and social engagements are particularly important during the transition into tertiary education and are critical factors in student retention¹. These engagements need to form the core of students' learning environment. Autonomy-supportive learning environments are ideal for engaging students academically and socially because they address students' needs for competence and relatedness by nurturing their interests, and allowing them to feel involved, as opposed to controlling environments². Autonomy-supportive environments are also important in developing students for their future professions in terms of promoting their self-regulation³.

The prevailing pandemic-driven academic guidelines which limit in-person interaction placed a challenge in designing an autonomy supportive learning environment at a time it is much needed. To our knowledge, there is currently no measure to assess whether the learning environment at a module level has been sufficiently autonomy supportive.

Therefore, the aim of this study is to examine the extent that students have experienced the learning environment to be autonomy supportive in a first-year module.

Methods

The study context was a common module on the Singapore health system for allied health and nursing students (n=528) undertaken in the first trimester of their programme in September 2020.

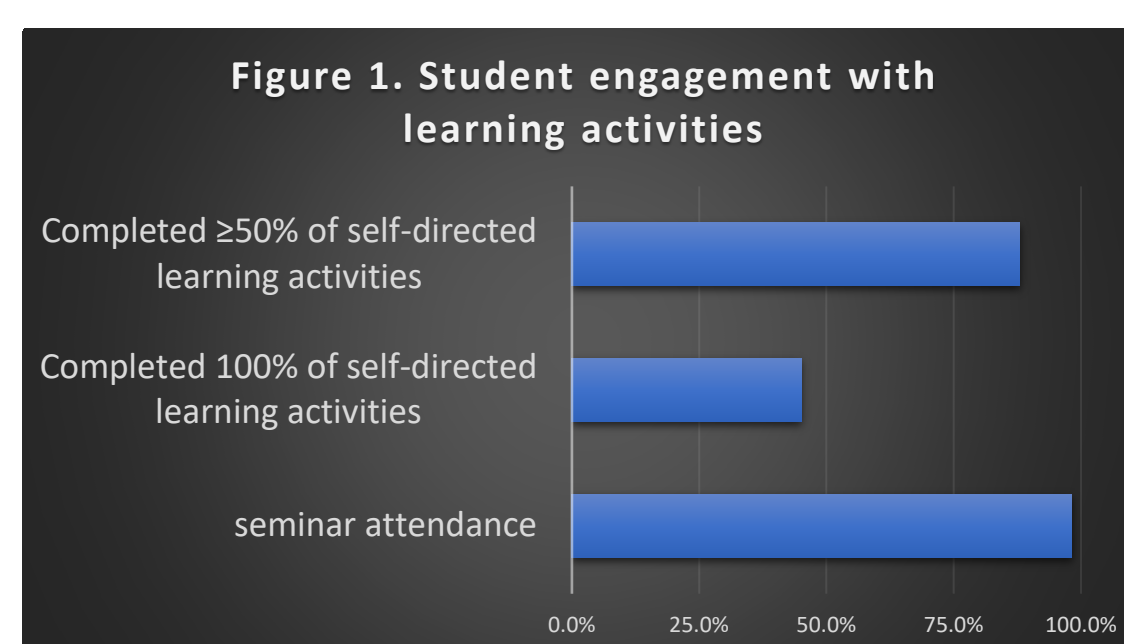
The module was administered on a pass or fail basis and adopted a flipped learning approach with structured self-directed learning content and face-to-face seminars in part to adhere to the prevailing pandemic safe distancing measures. The students were split into 16 mixed-disciplined seminar groups, supported by the same number of instructors who kept to consistent groups through the trimester. Arrangements were put in place to motivate and engage students on the learning management system. Students were also provided the opportunity to learn from and interact with industry experts through online lectures and a community networking day. Key module assessments included a group project exhibited on a social media platform and an individual written essay.

This study was underpinned by Deci and Ryan (1991)'s self-determination theory. The inquiry was approached using 3 sources of information: administrative records, observations of student behavior; and students' self-reports. Self-reports were collected via a short nine-item Autonomy-Supportive Structured Learning Environment (ASSLE) survey which was developed to capture students' experiences in terms of the three factors: (i) sense of belonging, (ii) relevance of content, and (iii) make informed choices, using a five-point Likert scale: 1–Never true; 2–Not really true ; 3–Neutral; 3–Somewhat true; and 4–Definitely true. Each item was followed by a prompt to find out what students associate the item with.

Results

A total of 145 (27.5%) students from the Physiotherapy, Occupational Therapy, Diagnostic Radiography, Radiation Therapy, Speech and Language Therapy, Dietetics and Nutrition, and Nursing programmes responded to the survey.

Engagement with the learning activities was good (see Figure 1). Students were observed to have actively participated in discussion board and project exhibition activities.



It was somewhat evident through the qualitative responses that students felt they had been **actively engaged** to relate to the module content, **appreciated the significance of the learning**, and was **adequately informed** about how they could navigate the learning process, activities and assignments to perform and achieve (*relevance of content* factor mean(SD) score range of 3 items, 3.74 (0.9) - 4.08 (0.8); *making informed choices* factor mean (SD) score range of 4 items, 3.44 (0.8) - 3.95 (0.7)). The role of the seminar instructors were clearly highlighted as being crucial in facilitating the class interaction and establishing the learning expectations as well as a safe learning environment. Students also appreciated the clear communication, structured self-directed learning components and the flexibility accorded to them with the flipped classroom approach. The engagement with industry experts and partners helped them relate the content with their future work.

The extent students **felt involved** in the learning together with their instructors and peers to feel a *sense of belonging* was not found to be as evident in this module via the examination of 2 items in this factor (mean (SD) range 3.01 (1.1) - 3.48 (0.9)).

Conclusion

Despite the current limitations and the size of the cohort, this module was largely successful in creating an autonomy supportive learning environment to engage the students. However, it is possible that limits placed on in-person interaction on a large cohort of students from mix disciplines in their early transition to tertiary education may have affected their ability to connect with others and their feeling of sense of belonging. This would have implications for future research.

References

¹ Tinto, V. (1975). Dropout from Higher Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research. *Review of Educational Research*, 45(1), 89–125.

² Deci, E. L., Vallerand, R. J., Pelletier, L. G., & Ryan, R. M. (1991). Motivation and education: The self-determination perspective. *Educational Psychologist*, 26(3-4), 325-346. on motivation: Perspectives on motivation (Vol. 38, pp. 237–288).

³ Clark, P. G. (1997). Values in health care professional socialization: Implications for geriatric education in interdisciplinary teamwork. *The Gerontologist*, 37(4), 441-451.