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Teaching, Learning, and Assessment: Insights into Students' Motivation to Learn

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Abstract

This study draws upon the perspectives of sport and recreation undergraduate students in New Zealand who were involved in the design of their own assessments, and discusses the implication of the teaching and learning environment on this process. In a previous study, student criticism had emerged of current teaching strategies and assessment methods at their institution. The purpose of this current study was to directly address some of these concerns and for lecturers and students to work collaboratively to develop a more learner-centred teaching and learning environment. Students from a second-year sociology of sport paper were invited to design their own exam. A session was facilitated where learning outcomes and exam strategies were addressed. Students were then given the opportunity to create their own exam questions in a student-led classroom environment. Concurrently, students from a third-year sports coaching paper were invited to fully design their own assessments. Student experience was captured through focus group interviews. Self-determination theory (SDT) provided the theoretical lens used to examine the data, with a specific focus on how the basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) of participants were either supported or thwarted. The findings suggest that the second-year students struggled with a perceived lack of teaching direction throughout the process. However, third-year students were extremely positive about the opportunity to have ownership of their learning experience, and analysis revealed an increase in intrinsic motivation to learn. This study highlights the importance of student voice, and encourages a process that allows students to contribute meaningfully toward the design and delivery of their own programmes of study. Additionally, it provides an opportunity for a co-leadership model of students' learning experience to emerge. Furthermore, it allows for reflection from both staff and students regarding the impact of the learning environment on student motivation to learn.

Keywords

Self-Determination Theory, SDT, Case Study, Assessment, Education, Learning, Teaching, Student-Centred Learning

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This study draws upon the perspectives of sport and recreation undergraduate students in New Zealand who were involved in the design of their own assessments, and discusses the implication of the teaching and learning environment on this process. In a previous study, student criticism had emerged of current teaching strategies and assessment methods at their institution. The purpose of this current study was to directly address some of these concerns and for lecturers and students to work collaboratively to develop a more learner-centred teaching and learning environment. Students from a second-year sociology of sport paper were invited to design their own exam. A session was facilitated where learning outcomes and exam strategies were addressed. Students were then given the opportunity to create their own exam questions in a student-led classroom environment. Concurrently, students from a third-year sports coaching paper were invited to fully design their own assessments. Student experience was captured through focus group interviews. Self-determination theory (SDT) provided the theoretical lens used to examine the data, with a specific focus on how the basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) of participants were either supported or thwarted. The findings suggest that the second-year students struggled with a perceived lack of teaching direction throughout the process. However, third-year students were extremely positive about the opportunity to have ownership of their learning experience, and analysis revealed an increase in intrinsic motivation to learn. This study highlights the importance of student voice, and encourages a process that allows students to contribute meaningfully toward the design and delivery of their own programmes of study. Additionally, it provides an opportunity for a co-leadership model of students' learning experience to emerge. Furthermore, it allows for reflection from both staff and students regarding the impact of the learning environment on student motivation to learn. Keywords: Self-Determination Theory, SDT, Case Study, Assessment, Education, Learning, Teaching, Student-Centred Learning

There has been increasing interest in educational research in recent years, specifically related to the influence of assessment methods, learning environments, deep and surface learning, and student motivation (Ellis, 2016). This research has predominantly highlighted the flaws of what has been perceived to be outdated teacher-centred pedagogy, and calls upon educators to evolve in a way that aligns more with the needs of today's student (Scott-Webber, 2012). Scott-Webber argues that educators need to become more responsive to the redesign of educational approaches, both learning and teaching, extending beyond incorporating new

technologies to reconceptualising the curricula and learning environments. The process of change, however, is complex, and the responsibility does not solely rest upon the shoulders of the teaching community. Lack of time, pressure from external sources and organisational structures that extend beyond the classroom are all too common factors. There are three primary aims of the brief summary of literature that informs this study: Firstly to explore elements of student motivation to engage with their study and in deeper learning; secondly to examine the influence of the environment on student learning; and thirdly to briefly examine the role of assessment.

Literature Review

Motivation

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), a theory of motivation initially developed by Deci and Ryan (1985), explains the reasons behind individuals' behaviour and decisions to pursue or maintain an activity. SDT is based on the concept that humans are driven by the need for growth and fulfilment. It has been argued that the degree to which one can achieve self-determination is dependent upon the degree to which one can satisfy three basic psychological needs; autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy is where one feels there is some degree of control over our action; competence is where one perceives an adequate ability to perform a task; and relatedness is where there is a sense of belonging within an environment. Failure to have these needs met adequately can lead to sub-optimal outcomes (Weiss & Amorose, 2008). SDT is therefore primarily focused on intrinsic motivation, described as one's participation in a certain activity in order to gain satisfaction from completing the activity itself, rather than gaining an external reward (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). In contrast, extrinsic motivation is defined as a means-end structure, where one engages in an activity to achieve an external reward or outcome (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Although the basis of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation differs, researchers have acknowledged that individuals can internalise forms of extrinsic motivation, a process which supports more autonomous motivated behaviour.

Motivation and education. It has been widely acknowledged that intrinsic motivation can support early cognitive development, and the educational environment in later years can either support or thwart individuals' needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence (Ryan & Deci, 2013). The internalisation of external motivation can also be an important element for learning, but is also heavily dependent upon an environment that supports learners' psychological needs (Ryan & Deci, 2013). In spite of this knowledge, it has been argued that the western world has largely adopted a model of education which promotes controlling teacher-centred learning environments and traditional instructional methods (Scott-Webber, 2012), otherwise referred to as controlling contexts (Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006). These controlling contexts are believed to hinder student motivation and discourage deeper approaches to learning (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006).

Vansteenkiste et al. (2006) described two types of controlling contexts, external and internal. Externally controlling environments are more authoritarian in approach, where coercive teaching strategies and reward contingencies or deadlines are often imposed. Externally controlling environments typically place pressure on students to learn by inducing externally controlled regulations. The notion of internal control refers to the pressure learners place on themselves as a result of meeting social expectations. Conversely, in an autonomy-supportive context, the educator is able to understand and empathise with the student's perspective (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006), ideally providing students with opportunities for self-initiation and choice, whilst actively limiting the pressures students face. Studies examining

motivation in education have generally found that when students are more autonomously motivated they display greater levels of persistence, achievement, and depth of learning (Guay, Ratelle, & Chanal, 2008). Environments that encourage students to achieve extrinsic rewards, however, can thwart and diminish one's intrinsic motivation (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006). It is widely acknowledged that humans are motivated to learn through curiosity and interest, but contemporary teaching practice with its focus on testing, achievement, and measurement, would appear to have largely ignored this inner resource (Ryan & Deci, 2013).

Environmental Influences

Teaching behaviours are only one aspect of the educational environment, as “teaching practices do not occur in a vacuum” (Ryan & Deci, 2013, p. 200). It has been claimed that there is excessive pressure on academics and institutions to continuously assess and measure the progress of their students and that assessment processes reflect more the needs of policy makers than they do the needs of teachers and learners (Barrington, 2003; Bennett & Brady, 2012). It has been argued that institutional practices that have emerged in Western societies in the later part of the twentieth century are representative of what has been referred to as an “audit culture” (Strathern, 2000), a term which encapsulates the application of processes of accountability common in the financial sector to the public domain, including the university sector (Shore & Wright, 2000). The traditional role of an academic, as a result of these broader societal developments, has come under greater scrutiny and is now associated with increasing measurement of performance in relation to research, publishing, teaching (Rimaldi, 2000), and community engagement. For academics, this can result in a situation where teaching is not so much about creating an optimal learning environment, but more on addressing external pressures for quality control (Corwin, 2005).

Teachers consequently, can feel pressurised to “teach to the tests” (Barrington, 2003, p. 30). Pressure to focus on assessment as opposed to learning can lead to perceptions of a lack of autonomy for teachers in higher education (James, 2014). A sense of freedom to experiment and take risks (in a safe environment) for both teachers and learners has been claimed to foster creativity and greater learning (Conway, 2011). However, an over-riding focus on assessment can lead to a tendency for teachers to “play safe” and can result in a lack of incentives for teachers to innovate and experiment (Norton, Norton, & Shannon, 2013).

Another important aspect of the educational environment is that students will be more likely to be engaged in their learning when they feel a sense of belonging (Ciobanu, 2014; Tinto, 1997). A need has been identified for institutions to provide a supportive learning environment (Riordan, 2005). Environments that do not nurture this need for relatedness can result in non-optimal learning outcomes. It has been long established that the traditional silent classroom environments of the early 20th century, epitomised by forward facing rows of desks, did not support a learning environment conducive to discussion and debate (Dewey, 1938/1997). The ability to engage in debate has been shown to foster critical thinking and result in students being more engaged in their courses of study (Doody & Condon, 2012; Walker & Warhurst, 2000). However, modern day classrooms and lectures in many institutions today (including our own institution), represent a still all too dominant traditional instructional paradigm, designed for students to passively sit and listen to an expert (Saulnier, Landry, Longenecker, & Wagner, 2008).

Assessment

Assessments can either hinder or enhance learning (Wilson & Scalise, 2006), and a need for strategies that design assessment *for* learning as opposed to assessment *of* learning has

been identified (Willis, 2007). The intent of assessment for learning is to nurture a collaborative autonomy-supportive process, which aims to involve students in the ongoing monitoring of their own learning. Although this appears at first glance to be an honourable aim, Willis (2007) cautions that more practical research involving both teachers and students is required to validate what is acknowledged to be a complex multi-faceted process.

There is evidence of educators attempting to introduce a range of assessment strategies, drawing predominantly upon the role of collaborative learning and formative assessment. For example, a study by McDuff (2012) examined whether a collaborative learning approach could enhance student engagement and enhance understanding of theoretical concepts introduced in a sociology class. Students worked in small learning groups, taking much of the responsibility for their own learning and McDuff reported significant increases in student engagement and interest in course concepts, and improvement in the understanding and subsequent application of theoretical concepts. A further collaborative learning study conducted by Vaughan (2014), demonstrated the potential of using collaborative learning approaches and highlighted the benefits of creating an environment that encouraged students to take responsibility for their own learning. Vaughan recommended the provision of opportunities for students to assess their own understanding through ongoing debate and discussion with their peers. Whilst there would appear to be fairly universal acknowledgement of the benefit of self-assessment, another study advised caution as the students in their study found that students can feel uncomfortable when being asked to assess others (Walker & Warhurst, 2000).

Summary

There would appear to be increasing recognition that the dominating influence of summative assessment processes needs to change in order to produce students who are deep as opposed to surface learners. In spite of the pressures academics face, there is an emerging body of literature from practitioners attempting to “fill the gap between successful learning and fair assessment” (Zacharis, 2010, p. 67). Yet the dominant model of education would still appear to support an environment where the childhood and adolescent years are dedicated to learning within a system that promotes extrinsic motivation and regurgitation of content.

Study Context

The first and third authors of this study are lecturers in sport and recreation, with respective interests in the sociology of sport and sports coaching, and in dance. We are also passionate educators however, and had shared concerns related to what we perceived to be a lack of student motivation and engagement in the learning process in our school. Arising from those concerns we approached the then head of our institution’s Student Learning Centre – the second author in this study – who has been a prime driver of student-centred teaching and learning initiatives in our school. We decided to collaborate on a series of projects designed to: capture the perspectives of both students and lecturers; draw upon those perspectives to design and implement an ongoing academic support strategy; and finally, to design, implement, and reflect on strategies aimed at enhancing the student learning experience. This current study reflects an attempt on our part to address concerns previously expressed by students, and to work with our students to develop a collaborative student-centred learning environment.

The Study

Background

This study took place at a medium-sized university in New Zealand (Aotearoa), and was a collaborative project involving lecturers from the School of Sport and Recreation and the university-wide Student Learning Centre (SLC). The aim of the project was to build upon research conducted in two previous studies (Nikolai, Silva, & Walters, 2017; Walters, Hallas, Phelps, & Ikeda, 2015). These previous projects aimed to:

1. Redesign an integrated academic development support strategy for sport and recreation undergraduate students.
2. Change current assessment methods and learning and teaching strategies in the sport and recreation degree second-year sociology of sport paper, in order to improve learners' creative and critical thinking abilities.

Strong criticism emerged from focus group interviews conducted with students in both these previous studies in relation to their university teaching and learning environment. In particular, students were highly critical of the teaching and assessment methods they had been exposed to at university, which they believed were driven by an outcome-driven business model. The aim of this current study was to directly address these concerns, and work collaboratively with students to develop a more learner-centred teaching and learning environment. The findings of this study will continue to inform the academic support strategy designed and implemented by the SLC.

Study Design

This study focused on two papers (subjects/courses) in the sport and recreation degree at our institution. Students enrolled in the degree can major in one of six subject areas: sport management, coaching, exercise science, outdoor education, health and physical education, or physical activity and nutrition. Alongside their major subject area coursework, students complete 11 core papers, common to students from all majors. Lecturers and the SLC worked collaboratively with students in the 2nd year sociology of sport core paper and the final (3rd) year coaching major paper, to enable students to have input into the design of their own assessments. These papers are coordinated by the primary author of this study. Discussions were held with the Associate Dean of the Faculty who was supportive of this work, and who offered advice on the constraints that needed to be adhered to in relation to university reporting regulations. The project was conducted in three phases:

- three pre-intervention student focus groups,
- the intervention (workshops), and
- three post-intervention focus groups.

The purpose of this study was to explore how a collaborative approach to assessment design would impact upon student motivation to engage with their own learning. Initially, focus group interviews were conducted with students from each paper to obtain an understanding of their experiences, and perceptions of the learning environments they had been exposed to at both high school and university. Assessment design workshops were then conducted in both papers. In the workshops, all enrolled students contributed to the design and timing of their assessments. Finally, follow-up focus groups were conducted to evaluate whether the process

of contributing to the design of their own assessments had impacted in any way upon students' approach to learning.

Method

A qualitative case study approach was adopted to conduct an in-depth investigation of the influence of a collaborative approach to assessment design on students' motivation to learn. Informed by the work of Merriam (2009), we aimed to gather multiple viewpoints and perspectives. The purpose of a case study is not to generalize, but rather to provide insight and a rich description of a given situation (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 2010). The theoretical lens used to examine student motivation was underpinned by SDT, with a specific focus on how the basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) of participants were either supported or thwarted (Ryan & Deci, 2013). Full ethical approval for the research was granted by our institution's ethics committee.

Workshops

Workshop sessions were conducted for all students enrolled on both papers, and were facilitated by the primary author and second author of this study. Students were provided with an overview of different types and purpose of assessment, including diagnostic, formative, and summative. They were then guided through the process of assessing learning outcomes specific to their papers. Two workshops of 90-minute duration were conducted for each group.

Sociology class workshop. Students were provided with an opportunity to design their own examination. An overview of the purpose of assessment and different types of examination were provided and students were then left to self-manage and organise themselves into working groups. The learning outcomes to be assessed in the examination were provided. The students were then encouraged to take ownership of the process, discuss possible examination types, and examination approaches that would assess the learning outcomes and content within the subject to date. As a class, they collectively had to reach a final consensus. The workshop activities were student-led, and the primary and second authors remained in the room to respond to any questions that arose during the session. The marking grid was determined by the lecturers once students had designed the assessment questions and the points to be allocated to each section within the examination.

Coaching class workshop. These final-year students were given greater flexibility over their assessment. The assessment was loosely categorised as a "project." Students were once again provided with the relevant learning outcomes to be assessed and were given scope to decide upon submission dates, the nature of the assessment, and marking grids.

Role of the lecturers. After the initial presentation related to assessment types and learning outcomes, lecturers (primary and second author) played a mainly observatory role, fielding questions as necessary. On completion of the sessions, the lecturers then reviewed the assessments designed by the students. Lecturers paid particular attention that the assessment specifically assessed the relevant learning outcomes and that the requirements of the students' work would be at a standard commensurate with the level of study (for second or third-year papers). The outcome of this review resulted in subsequent discussions with students in the following week's classes to ensure the assessment as presented accurately reflected their wishes.

Focus Group Participants

Following recommendations by our institution's ethics committee, to prevent any potential coercive influence on students, two research assistants not involved with the teaching of the papers explained the study to potential participants. The assistants also collected the consent forms and conducted the focus group interviews and data collection. Using purposive sampling, all of the students in the papers were eligible to participate in the study. A total of 89 students from the sociology paper and 20 students from the coaching paper were invited to participate in the focus group interviews. A total of 24 students (12 males and 12 females) volunteered to take part in both a pre-workshop and post-assessment focus group.

Data Collection

Data was gathered through three pre-workshop focus group sessions and three post-assessment focus group sessions. The focus groups were held out of class time and ran for between 45 minutes and one hour. The focus groups consisted of two groups from the sociology class; one group of nine participants (five female and four male) and one group of seven participants (five female and two male). The third focus group was drawn from the coaching class and consisted of eight participants (two female and six male). Guidelines for duration of focus group meetings and number of participants were drawn from recommendations by Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, and Robson (2001). The digital recordings were transcribed verbatim by one of the research assistants. The interviews followed a semi-structured format and the open-ended questions were designed to encourage participants to be reflective and evaluate their thinking in relation to their learning experiences (Bain, 2004). The aim of the interview was to facilitate an environment that was conducive to engender multiple perspectives rather than consensus (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The focus group questions are outlined in Table 1. It has been claimed that one advantage of focus groups is that the social interaction that can occur can result in data that is possibly deeper and richer than would possibly emerge from individual interviews (George, 2013).

Table 1. *Pre-workshop Focus Group Questions*

Introductory Statement: The purpose of this focus group is to obtain an understanding of your experiences and your perceptions of learning environments, teaching strategies and assessment models at high school and university so far.
1. What are some of the challenges or successes you have experienced as a student when expressing your opinion about your education to lecturers/teachers or other staff?
2. How much opportunity have you had to decide for yourself how you are to go about your own work or to contribute to the design of your educational activities at high school or university?
3. How do you feel as a student you have connected with others at school and university, and what do you believe encourages or hinders your ability to connect with others (including lecturers, tutors/teachers and class mates)?
4. What do you believe are the key factors that contribute to your academic success and enable you to feel valued (or not) as a student?
5. What type of learning environments or teaching strategies do you believe are effective or ineffective and how do they influence you as a student?
6. What do you think is an effective way of assessing your understanding in theoretical papers?
7. Is there anything else you would like to tell us?

Table 2. *Post-workshop Focus Group Questions*

Introductory statement: The purpose of this focus group is to explore whether contributing to the design of your own assessments has altered your perception of your approach to learning as a student and your perception of your learning environment and teaching strategies you encounter.
1. Reflecting upon this semester, how has the ability to actively contribute to the design of your own assessments encouraged or hindered you as a student?
2. What are some of the challenges or successes you have experienced as a student during this process?
3. How has this experience encouraged or hindered your ability to connect with others (including lecturers, tutors/teachers and class mates)?
4. Do you think your engagement with this process has resulted in an effective way of assessing your understanding in theoretical papers? Why?
5. Did this experience encourage you to engage more with your own learning? Why?
6. Is there anything else you would like to tell us?

Data Analysis

On completion of transcription, the research team met to discuss the initial analysis. The authors then independently analyzed the data, following thematic analysis guidelines recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006), identifying and coding dominant emergent themes and sub-themes. The first stage involved close readings of the transcripts, followed by an initial research team meeting to discuss the themes that emerged. The qualitative software tool, Weft QDA, was then used to code the qualitative data into the dominant emerging themes and sub-themes. A subsequent meeting was then conducted by the research team to review and discuss the findings, and to establish inter-coder reliability. Once themes had been agreed upon, the data was then revisited by the primary author using an SDT lens. Weft QDA was used once again to examine each theme and sub-theme from the perspective of the three basic needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) being supported or undermined, and how the actions of significant others (lecturers and peers) and the environment either supported or thwarted those needs. Subsequent research team meetings were then conducted to discuss and finally confirm the primary author's findings in relation to SDT.

Findings

This section presents the key findings from the pre- and post-assessment focus groups. An overview of the outcome of the workshops conducted with students is also presented.

Pre-Workshop Focus Groups

The purpose of these interviews was to elicit students' general perceptions of their learning experiences at both high school and university. As these interviews occurred prior to the assessment workshops (which differed for each class), the findings for both the sociology class and the coaching class are merged and presented together. What strongly emerged was a strong critical appraisal of their current teaching environment at university. The dominant themes to emerge from the analysis related to influences on motivation to learn, and a sense of isolation and lack of community.

Influences on motivation to learn. The dominant sub-theme to emerge within this higher-level theme related to the strong role that the teacher plays in shaping the learning experience of students. Other emergent sub-themes related to the influence of the environment,

which included the influence of class activities and assessments, and of participants' passion for sport and recreation.

The role of the teacher. Although participants highlighted some positive examples of what was perceived to be good teaching practice, what emerged was a strong critique of teacher-centred behaviour at university. As can be seen from Table 1, few questions specifically related to the teacher, but the focus group conversations continually returned to that theme. Agreement attitudes varied between lecturers, but all participants had experienced what they perceived to be a lack of interest and help from a number of lecturers who were seen to be unapproachable. There was tension as they also felt that now they were at university they should take ownership of their own learning, but a sense of isolation from their lecturers emerged. The lecturers were identified as powerful influencers in relation to motivation to learn, both positively and negatively:

A lot of it [motivation to learn] can be the lecturer like if they are inspiring you to learn. Because I've had the opposite where I've had a paper that I was really excited about but it's just not being delivered to me in the way I want it to be and its really put me off studying it and I'm thinking to myself, hang on this is like your favourite subject, why are you procrastinating studying for this? It's because you sort of been disempowered to learn. (Male student 1 [MS1])

When the participants were asked if they had been given opportunities to provide input into their learning, no evidence emerged. The only times they had been offered opportunities to express their opinion was when providing end-of-semester feedback on their papers at university. What the participants did like was when lecturers actually appeared to care about them: "I like the way how some lecturers actually care and actually try and help you." (MS2). Lecturers teaching styles were also critiqued, "I find that some lectures forget what it's like to understand something for the first time" (MS3), with lecturers being criticised for "talking at students" (MS4) and "death by powerpoint" (FS2).

The learning environment. The university environment was also seen to have a predominantly negative impact on real learning. Participants spoke about how the structure of their classes and assessments influenced their motivation to learn. Classroom activities in a number of papers were largely seen to be designed primarily to prepare students for assessments.

I'll put [paper name removed] out there as a prime example of the paper that basically just wants students to pass. They are like "here is the information just learn this," and you can, you'll be alright. And it's annoying because it's one of those papers that is probably of the most relevance to me and that I was really interested in and now I'm just a bit disempowered to learn. (MS1)

Assessments were also predominantly seen as tools of measurement, as opposed to being structured to promote optimal learning. Participants were critical about an environment that basically provided them with 12 weeks of content and then examined their ability to regurgitate that information in one examination. They spoke more favourably about classes that were structured to provide ongoing assessment; this motivated their learning. However, there was a perceived lack of consistency in an environment that allowed wide ranges of teaching styles and approaches:

I think there's some lecturers who will spoon feed you, some lecturers are like "figure it out for yourself." You can't just be I'm going to give you all the

information or I'm going to give you no information. There's no real balance.
(Female student 1 [FS1])

Participants referred to the classroom environment as being an important factor that either encouraged or discouraged them to learn. There were examples where classroom activities did, however, spark interest in a paper and stimulated a desire for ongoing learning:

What we did in that paper today was good. We were given the chapters to read [before class], which aren't that stimulating. I write notes on the chapters and then we talk about it in class and then we do some weird little activity about it and then apply the theories to the activities and then I'm sitting there with my notes and I'm like oh that's right and I've never been interested in any kind of [sociological] theories like that before. I walked into this paper like kind of rolling my eyes like this is going to be so crap. And now I love it [the paper], it's amazing [. . .]. (FS2)

Passion. Nearly all of the participants had a passion for sport and recreation, which served as the primary motive for them studying in this discipline. Many, however, had been advised by parents or career guidance counsellors at school not to pursue a career in sport and recreation, as the industry was generally not well paid, and had been encouraged to follow more lucrative pathways. A representative comment from one focus group conversation on this theme was:

What I like about sport and rec[reation], I started just doing business and I found that really boring. I still want to do the business side but having the sport is the main focus now. I think this degree is actually awesome and I actually really like it yeah. (FS3)

This was a recurring theme through the focus groups; students were passionate about sport and recreation and were enthusiastic about working in an industry doing something they loved.

A sense of isolation. A theme to emerge was a sense of isolation and of being unsupported at university. Students felt there was a discourse related to being a student - a student culture - which socially constructed them to feel as though they should be autonomous, and responsible for their own learning:

I think university is definitely different to school in the fact that unless [. . .] you are actually put in a situation where [you are] told to interact with other people you don't." (FS4)

When participants spoke positively about their experiences, their comments often made reference to situations where they had developed a support network of peers and friends. This was seen to benefit learning as one participant acknowledged:

Well I think I've connected great with all my peers [laughs]. I pretty much got my mates from group stuff in class. We stay up really late, sometimes two in the morning doing our assignments and messaging, what's the equation for this? Or what is the answer to this? (MS3)

Although participants referred throughout the focus group sessions to positive aspects, and clearly were passionate about sport, the dominant themes to emerge during these pre-workshop interviews were predominantly critical of their teaching and learning environment.

The Workshops

Separate assessment design workshops were then conducted with both the second-year sociology class and the third-year coaching classes. After the introductory sessions on assessment design and learning outcomes, there followed a question and answer session. Students were then tasked with contributing to their assessment design.

Sociology class workshops. The purpose of the examination in the sociology class was diagnostic from a lecturers' perspective; the aim being to establish students' level of understanding of sociological theories before they moved onto the more challenging coursework which required students to apply the theories to social issues. The examination was due in week five of the 12-week course. The students in two separate classes and workshops (N = 50, and N = 39) were asked to design the structure of their examination and to reach consensus. The students self-managed the session, with teaching staff acting as observers but available to clarify any requirements or answer questions the students had. Initial discussions revolved around making the exam as "easy as possible." However, these discussions soon moved to a focus on how best to demonstrate understanding related to the learning outcomes. Students in both workshops coincidentally constructed exams which were "seen," that is, the essay style questions were known by students. The students felt that an essay style argument they had time to prepare for and think about, represented a fairer and truer assessment of their knowledge than an exam that simply required them to memorise and regurgitate knowledge. The teaching team then reviewed the exams and agreed that they accurately assessed the learning outcomes, and were at the correct level of study for a second-year paper. The exam was worth 20% of the overall mark available for the entire paper.

Coaching class workshop. The purpose of this workshop with 20 coaching students was to give them the opportunity to completely design their assessment. The workshop followed the same format as the sociology class workshops. Once again, the student conversations started with a desire to make the assessment as easy as possible. However, this soon progressed to consensus that the group wanted the opportunity to show their depth of understanding. The class was a final-year class and the assessment provided an opportunity for them to show their understanding of theoretical concepts they had been introduced to during their degree. This assessment was worth 50% of the overall mark available for the paper. The assessment as designed and agreed upon by the group comprised of a group written report (20%); a group oral presentation (20%), which included opportunities for a panel of lecturers to ask questions of their presentation to establish true depth of knowledge; and a peer assessment sheet, where the students were able to award marks to each member of the group based on their commitment to the group process. Once again, the teaching team concurred that the assessment was at the appropriate level and accurately assessed the learning outcomes.

Post-Assessment Focus Groups

The findings of the two focus groups with the sociology students and the one focus group with the coaching students are presented separately. The experiences of the participants from the two classes differed significantly.

Sociology class focus groups. The dominant themes to emerge from these two post-assessment focus groups related to a perceived lack of direction; the effectiveness of the assessment design process; and the challenges of working within groups. Although some

students valued the opportunity to have input into the assessment process, an overall sense of dissatisfaction with the process emerged.

A lack of direction. The majority of these predominantly second-year participants did not like the autonomy they were given to design their assessment. A number felt that the process lacked direction and guidance from their lecturers, and struggled with the tasks they were given. They felt that they were inadequately prepared to engage with this process.

I don't think there was enough input from the lecturers, because I feel as a class we didn't really get a lot done. There wasn't much direction. (FS1)

The dominant theme to emerge from these focus groups was that students perceived a lack of support from the teaching staff. They could see the benefits, but the process was perceived to be too challenging.

The effectiveness of the assessment design process. The aim of the project was to nurture a greater sense of student ownership of their learning, ideally promoting a deeper engagement with learning. Conversations in the student focus groups, however, focused on the marking of the assessment and the marks received, as opposed to the impact of the process itself on learning. A typical example of this concern over marking was.

I think it's a great exercise but I don't think that it's something that should be worth 20% of our paper. I thought [the marking] it's quite rough. (MS1)

The challenges of working in groups. A sense of frustration emerged with the group work aspect of the process. The classroom allocated for the sociology sessions was a stereotypical small lecture theatre, rows of forward-facing desks, designed for students to listen attentively to a teacher lecturing them from the front of the room. The workshop group activities were therefore severely impacted upon by the layout of the room. The participants were critical not only of the environment, but of a process that allowed certain students to dominate, and other students to "hide" or disengage from the process.

My personal frustrations were with the people down the back [who did not engage], and the people wanting to oversimplify and you could tell they didn't care - they just wanted to get the marks. (FS2)

What also emerged was that many of these 2nd year students did not know each other. They did not attend the same classes and the resultant lack of relatedness appeared to impact upon some students' propensity to engage in classroom discussions and activities. In relation to this assessment design process, this resulted in dissatisfaction from a group of students who actually wanted to engage and learn.

Coaching class focus groups. The conversations with the third-year coaching class were far more positive. The dominant themes to emerge from this final focus group session were related to a sense of personal responsibility for learning; the role of the lecturer; and relatedness.

Personal responsibility. When asked how they felt about the process of designing their own assessment, these participants appeared to feel a sense of pride in what they had done:

You kind of get all this pressure put on you to make this assessment which if you fail it's ultimately you're the reason you fail (laughs), but then also I guess it gives you responsibility. We're adults now. You are not getting babied anymore. (MS1)

The participants attributed “real life” relevance to the skills they were learning in class. Skills such as taking responsibility for their own learning and problem solving were seen to be challenging, but were important skills for them to develop before they graduated and entered the workforce.

The students had also been able to negotiate the due dates of their assessments and really enjoyed the freedom and opportunity to have that input. The participants’ perspectives related to what it meant to be “successful” students also appeared to move the focus away from grades and marks to personal development:

I think back to that question about what I was like in terms of successfulness. I don’t think it’s like, you know, getting good grades [. . .]. In terms of being able to develop things like personal communication with other people, and having confidence to express your own thoughts and opinions, and personal growth, means more in terms of success to me now. (MS3)

The role of the lecturer. Although the focus of the interviews was on the process rather than the teacher, a dominant theme to emerge once again from this focus group was the significance of the role of the lecturer. Participants appeared to equate the process they had experienced in this coaching class to be driven primarily by the teaching style of the lecturer.

[This lecturer is] giving the students the freedom to actually decide and that automatically allows you to understand that at the onset, that what we do is applicable not only in the coaching context but within our learning environment as well. (MS4)

A sense of relatedness. A strong sense of belonging and relatedness emerged from the focus group with the coaching students. The class self-managed itself into groups of four when designing the assessment, and stayed in those groups when they decided that the assignment itself would have a group focus. Participants spoke positively about an environment that enabled them to voice their opinions, and the confidence of being final-year students where they knew their classmates contributed to a sense of relatedness:

Just being able to share everything is important which you can do in this paper and [one of the other papers]. They have been the most useful where you can have input and everyone is just on the same page, gets ideas off each other. It’s not like other papers in first year or other subjects where it’s kind of, you know, should I speak up or not? (MS2)

Discussion

This study provided us with key insights into students’ perceptions of their learning environment. Students spoke about how their learning experiences varied considerably dependent very much from their perspective on the approach adopted by individual lecturers. This supports previous literature that highlights the significant role that educators play in creating students’ motivational climate (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006). Many students also felt that assessments were often simply used as tools of measurement and not designed to promote learning. They were critical of an environment that basically delivered them content, and measured their ability to reproduce that content. This supports previous research which suggests that higher education is dominated by traditional instructional styles of teaching (Scott-Weber, 2012).

The key findings of this study, however, support the ideas put forward in previous studies that students are more likely to engage in learning when their need for relatedness is met, they feel supported (Riordan, 2005), and that they belong (Ciobanu, 2014; Tinto, 1997). Concerns that emerged in this study related to students feeling a sense of isolation in the university environment. It has been suggested that the motivational profiles of students are context-sensitive and that the autonomous profile is more likely to emerge in university than in high school (Ratelle, Guay, Vallerand, Larose, & Senécal, 2007). However, there is a difference between an environment that is autonomy-supportive and encourages students to feel a sense of ownership over their own learning, and an environment that leaves them feeling isolated. There is a need for institutions, including our own, to create supportive learning environments that nurture a sense of belonging and relatedness, as this will potentially lead to greater degrees of student engagement with learning (Ciobanu, 2014; Riordan, 2005).

The impact of the assessment intervention in this study varied between the two student groups. Assessment has been traditionally seen as purely a means of measurement; assessment of learning as opposed to assessment for learning (Willis, 2007), and the second-year sociology students seemed unable to shift their thinking in this regard. An over-riding preoccupation with the marking of the assessment emerged, as opposed to consideration of how the process affected their motivation to actually learn. Reeve, Bolt, and Cai (1999) acknowledged that a teacher's motivating style can support students' needs for competence and autonomy, but it would appear in this instance that for a range of possible reasons the participants did not feel supported enough in this process.

The decision to assign marks was one discussed by the research team when designing this project. There was a feeling that many of our students are motivated by assessments and if no marks were attached then students would not engage. In hindsight, the design of this aspect of the project (the exam in the sociology class) reflected a flawed approach by the research team. The allocation of marks appeared to actually thwart students' needs for feelings of competence. Students need to feel safe when trying something new (Conway, 2011), and the lack of lecturer direction appeared not to provide a supportive enough environment to nurture feelings of safety and autonomy.

The findings of this study in relation to the final-year coaching students, however, were positive. Guay et al. (2008) noted that autonomous learners are more likely to engage with challenges and take responsibility for their own learning. These students clearly valued the opportunity to take ownership of their learning experience and this appeared to support their needs for autonomy and competence. Carless (2015) defined learning-oriented assessment as when the focus is more on the potential to encourage learners to engage in deeper learning and higher cognitive engagement than on assessment purely for measurement. Unlike the focus groups with the second-year students, the third-year students did not refer to measurement and the marking of the assessment, but rather focused on how they valued being given opportunities for personal responsibility.

The interactions with the coaching class reflected a more collaborative student-teacher relationship, which the students clearly appreciated. Bergström (2010) examined the power relationships between teachers and students, and noted that when the power relationship shows more openness than authoritarianism then greater opportunities can emerge for the student to take responsibility for his or her own learning. In relation to the student's learning process, this shift in the traditional student-teacher power relationship can result in positive cognitive outcomes. However, as evidenced with the second-year sociology students, it would appear to be fundamentally important that students feel safe and supported before they are able to engage in activities that take them outside their comfort zone. An environment that supports students' need for relatedness has been identified as important through engendering a feeling of belonging to a community (Ciobanu, 2014), providing opportunities for learning to occur in a

fun environment (Raymond, Homer, Smith, & Gray, 2013), and enhancing learning through active and collaborative activities (Vaughan, 2014). The findings of this current study suggest that students need to first have their need for relatedness met before they feel able to engage in more autonomous learning activities.

Limitations

The context of this case study relates specifically to a cohort of sport and recreation students in a NZ university. The focus of this study was on motivation, and as indicated in the findings section, the primary motivation for these students is to work in an industry that they are passionate about. There is no claim that this motivational study would have similar outcomes in a different setting. However, the findings of this study may resonate with other educators, and readers of this study may draw inferences that they may feel are applicable to their own situation (Lincoln & Guba, 1990).

Conclusion

Willis (2007) cautioned that the collaborative learning process is complex and more practical research is required. This current project is ongoing, and the themes that emerged from the second-year focus groups indicate that greater thought needs to go into providing a more supportive environment for students when they are provided with opportunities to have input into the design of their assessments. As noted by Ryan and Deci (2013), teaching does not occur in a vacuum. Class sizes, the classroom itself, and many students not knowing each other prior to this class were all factors that impacted upon the teaching team's ability to enhance students' motivation to engage with learning. The second-year students quite simply did not appear to be ready to engage in this process, and the findings suggest that there was a perceived lack of direction from the lecturers. Guay et al. (2008) noted that structure is important to students, and that there is a need for the learning environment to be consistent and to a degree, predictable. More support will be provided in the future to guide students at this level in their learning environment.

The outcomes for the third-year coaching group were significantly different. These students valued the opportunity to design their own assessment, and perceived the process and the environment to be supportive of their needs for relatedness, autonomy, and competence. In the final focus groups with these third-year students, there was no mention of grades or marks. Instead, the themes to emerge related more to learning associated with personal growth. Moving forward, this ongoing research will draw upon these findings to continue to provide opportunities for students to have more input into their own learning.

As highlighted by the literature reviewed, and reinforced by the views of the students in this study, the role of the teacher is hugely influential in shaping students' motivational climate. The easiest recommendation to make would be for a call for teachers to be more student-centred in their approach, to collaborate with students to help shape their learning environment, and to move away from a style of teaching dominated by instruction and measurement. This, however, would be to ignore the broader societal pressures placed on academics to be accountable on multiple fronts. These pressures emanate primarily from a higher education system designed not so much to encourage learning, but to measure. However, the findings of this current study suggest there is potential for lecturers to be more creative in their design of assessments, and using the assessment process not simply as a tool of measurement, but as a process that can stimulate students' motivation to learn.

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