

Lifestyle and Learning Habits of Croatian College Students: Self-Directed Learners

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand more about the activities and learning habits of Croatian College students through the lens of self-directed learning. This research took place in the National Library of Zagreb University over a two year period. Researchers would ask available students for their opinion on a questionnaire; approximately 75 interviews took place. The findings indicated that self-directed learning is supported by leisure activity, community of friends, and comfortable surroundings.

Keywords: Self-directed learning, interviews, Croatia, college students, learning styles.

Introduction

Zagreb University has approximately 60,000 plus students. It is the premiere university of Croatia. And, it is the goal of most Croatian high school students to attend this university. Begun in 1600's, this University has also had an impact in southern Europe. Since the breakup of former Yugoslavia, this university has emerged as an important part in the growth of Croatia.

Croatian students have several choices to attend university. However, the main school without question is Zagreb University. Every year, each faculty or college awards several hundred scholarships to students. Others, who want to attend, may be able to pay the school, and likewise those who fail exams may eventually pay. Recently, Zagreb University has initiated a small fee for its students, whereas formerly the tuition was free. Changes are occurring rapidly in central Europe especially in places of former Communist control. Therefore updated studies are important about various facets of life. The purpose of this study was to understand more about the learning habits of Croatian College students; in particular this study focused on how students are learning. This research took place through interviews in the lobby of the National Library of Zagreb University. The interviews occurred over a three year period. Researchers would ask available students for their opinion on this questionnaire. Approximately 75 interviews took place over a two year period. Most of the interviews were conducted by one experienced researcher and two others also assisted. All of the interviews incorporated the same format and approach. The interviews were evaluated through the ideas of self-directed learning.

Related Literature

This literature review develops the historical perspective and foundation of self-directed learning and reviews recent research on self-directed learning. College students are becoming adults, and self-directed learning is one of the main ways that adults learn (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Tough, 1971). Homework may be considered to be one example of self directed learning. This is especially true when the student is freely choosing to learn on his/her own. Perhaps this connection of homework and self-directed learning has been overlooked in previous research.

Self-directed learning is not just a historical fad of lifelong learning. It is also the hallmark of how adults continue to learn. We will now discuss the current issues of learning and how adults are continuing to learn and its influencer on their life. There has been a great deal of interest in the topic of life satisfaction and adults. In addition, there has been a focus on the correlation of SDL with life satisfaction. Life satisfaction seems a common goal and any activity contributing to one's life satisfaction is deemed important (Maslow, 1970). Brockett's (1985, 1987) research on readiness for learning, with a combined sample of 124, indicated a significant positive relationship with life satisfaction. Confirming Brockett's research is Fisher (1986, 1988) whose study indicated a positive relationship between formal education and SDL. Results indicated active adults had a significant positive relationship with educational attainment, less anemia, the propensity to engage in SDL, and awareness of SDL activities.

Jensen (1993) indicated the mental stimulation and transitions to the college atmosphere impacted the life satisfaction of adults in a positive way. This dissertation investigated the experience and meaning of adults receiving a college degree who have

entered the university at a later stage in life. Similar to a later study by Little (1995), this study of seven narratives revealed an enhanced self-esteem of the adult. This was evident by increased energy from association with younger generation and mental stimulation by the challenge of the coursework. Interestingly, these adults who returned to college found a great deal of acceptance, instead of the expected social rejection or ageism.

The powerful potential of SDL is its applicability to any subject and any learner (Grow, 1991). Adults have a need to learn about many different topics because each person has a unique set of experiences, interests, and problems. Long's (1993) discussion of dissertations pointed out research on the relationship of SDL to such specific and varied topics as back pain, myocardial infarction, and finances. In addition there are studies that relate SDL to learning information over the Internet, distance education, and in various situations in the workplace (Confessore, 1992).

Various writers have discussed how SDL can empower adults. Lamdin's (1997) research indicated that SDL in adults is more prevalent and substantial than previously thought, and is the basis for solving problems. She discusses how self-directed learning projects can range from specific skills (such as a how to learn golf) to never-ending issues (such as genealogy). She continually affirms that SDL is a powerful force for prevention of early decline and dependency. Even though many writers in a variety of fields will describe adults as a similar group, a closer look reveals the uniqueness of each adult (Lassey & Lassey, 2001; Quadagno, 1999). The basic premise of SDL is its focus on the individual learner. Each person chooses to learn about various topics in a unique way and fashion (Eisen, 1998).

SDL often occurs in one's leisure time and researchers may overlook this interesting aspect of SDL. Verduin and McEwen (1984) and Verduin, Miller, and Greer (1986) have shown how leisure time is often utilized by adults for SDL. One of the main arenas of adult education is to provide adults opportunities to learn about experiences that will enrich their life. SDL is particularly suited for learning about leisure and self-enrichment and can take place at home, libraries, outdoors and other nontraditional places of learning (McGuire et al. 1996). But even more important for this work, is how students choose to spend their free time in homework activities.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to understand more about study habits of Croatian college students through the lens of self-directed learning. I and two other researchers interviewed a total of 75 students during a two year period. Most of the interviews took place in the National Library of Zagreb University.

One half of the surveys were in English, and the others were in Croatian and then translated to English. Those that were in English, however, Croatian students were speaking English. Therefore, there is an issue of language translations in this research. However, all of the participants in this study had 8 – 10 years of English study, and the other researchers were fluent in English language. This may have somehow limited some of the responses to the study. However, rather than being a detriment to this study, the different language added to the richness of this study by offering insight into a different country.

Findings

These are the responses to the questionnaire taken among students from October 2004 to April 2007. This represents a cross section of the Zagreb University, such as different faculties (colleges), students who live in the dorm as well as students who live at home in Zagreb, and students from different locations in Croatia. This sample consisted of 75 students. Not only did we learn about how students are learning, but we also learned about the typical life of college students in Zagreb University.

First Question - Describe Your Life as a Student.

This question helps us to understand the general life of the student. This open ended question allows for a variety of answers. Overall the answers seemed to be either in a positive outlook or a negative one. For example, this statement: “Lots of studying. It is a good time. And I have organized my time so I can have free time,” seems to reflect a positive outlook on life. Yet there were negative statements. These included: “I study all the time and I am stressed out.” And “Most of the time I am there in school on lectures and studying for exams, there is a lot of work to do, and many of the lectures are bad.”

Positive statements: 45

Negative statements: 10

Neutral statements: 21

Second Question: What advice would you give a first year student?

Advice giving can be one form of learning. For example, what are the things that you have learned that you would like to pass on to others? This, combined with thought and speculation, can suggest specific topics the student has seen that are valuable in their own particular experience. Perhaps these lessons are not from the specific classroom, but

are created from life experience. These lessons of life are not just book knowledge but become part of the actual life of the student.

These answers include the following: Get Advice and Help from others especially older students and your teachers: 4; Leave the Faculty (college) if it is not working out: 2; Work and study hard: 37; Don't procrastinate your assignments: 2; Meet other people: 5 Don't worry: 4.

Third Question: What is your study or learning habits?

This question may pinpoint the focus of this research. What is the individual student's actual ways of personal learning? What are they doing in order to learn certain subjects? This research is interested in the unique ways of learning, how they individually prepare for exams, and their expectations of the teachers.

This question seemed to evoke a variety of answers. Also reflecting the concept that we are all individual learners. I have summarized the answers to these questions in the following way:

Hours studying daily: 6, 2 – 5, 8, 7, 7, 6, 6, 5, 6, 8, 3, 6, 12, 8, 7, 8, 6, 6, 8, 2, 2, 5, 4, 3, 8, 5, 5, 3, 3.

Location of studying: Where I live (22) such as - Home or dorm (8), in my room (9), on my bed (3), in my kitchen (2); Library (18)

How to Learn: Study with others: 10. Study alone: 16.

How to study: Write or summarize 7, Memorize 2, Read 8, Underline 4, Get notes 1, Speak about it 1, Some way to think about the topic (study or review) 5. Taking break during studying: 1 Study at the last minute: 13 Work hard while you are studying: 2.

One student shared: “I study in my room, alone....as much as I need.” Another one said: “I study in the library or at home, about 12 hours a day with breaks.” One says: “I study from 8 am till 4 pm in my room. I use markers for highlighting, I make notes, and I study from the books.”

Question Four: Mistakes you have made while being a student?

This question is similar to the one concerning advice for others. However, this question asks the individual to think about what were some specific mistakes they have made.

Mistakes made: I was not serious or I was not working hard enough: 21; Time Management: 17; I chose the wrong college: 3; Outside activities: 2; Money: 2; Did not follow guidelines of college: 4; Poor self confidence: 5.

One student said: “I had a bad transition to university from high school. I did not handle free time so well. I am now glad that I did this. I am well founded, because I am involved in so many activities.” Another said: “I was irresponsible toward studying.”

Question Five. What problems or stress do you have at this time? How do you handle it?

This question allows for the student to think about stress and difficulty in their personal life. Too much stress can be a negative factor that may influence the learning experience.

The answers were around several themes: Money: 10; Future: 4; Will I finish the college?: 7; Can I find a job?: 3; Passing exams: 23; Time: 5; Home or personal issues: 8; Difficulty with professors: 2.

One student said: “I will be honest with you. And don’t tell anyone who I am. I am terrified, I am scared of finishing faculty. I have never really worked, what will I be,

what will I do? I must go to work, I must be a grown up and earn my own money. I am scared of that, I am positive I can not find a job.”

Question Six: How do you spend spare time?

Leisure time or spare time is a matter of personal choice. When one decides to learn during free time it can be a powerful experience. In addition, the choices of one's free time are also a very unique expression of the individual. When one understands the choices of free time we can also have a more intimate view into the lives of students.

The free time choices of these students were spread around several areas, these include the following.

Being with others 55; Spend time with friends: 17; Spend time with girlfriend/boyfriend: 4; Going to cinema: 12; Café (going for coffee with friends): 16; Disco or clubs: 6; Recreation activity – such as exercise or being outdoors: 30; Music: 6; Television: 6; Work: 2; Go home: 4; Rest/relax: 4; Go on seaside: 3; Read: 3; Travel: 2

One student said: “I go to aerobics, for a coffee, to shopping I go out to The Movie Pub, Papaja, I hang out in Sava dorms, or go to Jarun.” Another stated: “I like to go for a cake in slasticarna (student ice cream shop) and to gossip with a friend. When I go home on the weekends it is much more relaxed, Saturdays I go to clubs, or coffee shops.”

Discussion

As a result of this research we can conclude the following: 1. Students that continue to study also have a positive outlook on their life. 2. Students eventually realize that they must take responsibility for their own work. 3. Students incorporate a variety of methods to study often dependent on their personality. 4. Time management is the main

problem of these students. 5. The priority of these students is to pass their exams, finish the college, and get a job. 6. Busy students also have an active leisure time. This is often seen in activities with friends and recreation and sports.

Self-directed learning is a significant aspect of one's education and especially indicative of homework. Yet on a larger scale, the concept of self-directed learning is synonymous with advances throughout history. Writers have discussed education outside of the classroom, the importance of personal reflection in learning, social dynamics in learning, and that self-direction is a naturally occurring process (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991; Candy, 1991; Confessore, 1992; Jarvis, 2001). Affirming these ideas is that self-direction is more than a historical fad of adult education, and these ideas of self-planned learning have remained as one of the pillars of adult learning (Merriam, 2001).

Similarly, we have seen in this review that self-directed learning is associated with life satisfaction and empowerment. The students in this study indicated similar ideas of Brockett (1985, 1987), and Long (1993) that being involved in self-directed learning such as homework helps to create a positive atmosphere in one's life. There is this belief that they will eventually pass the exam and find a job. Further more it is obvious, concurring with many writers (Lassey & Lassey, 2001; Quadagno, 1999), that self directed learning or homework is unique for each person. The participants in this study described a variety of ways to learning. This included learning alone, with friends, at home, in the library, and utilizing reading, reviewing, and writing.

And, lastly we have seen that leisure is a significant part of each person's life. And, that learning also takes place in one's leisure time (Roberson, 2005). The students in this study were learning on their own during their free time in the National library. In

addition they were surrounded by hundreds of others who were also learning. These episodes of learning were punctuated by coffee breaks where they would go with their friends to the café on the top floor of the library. Although many people appear to be learning on their own, there is often a foundation of social support in self-directed learning (Tough, 1971).

We have also read about the unique ideas of learning through self-directed efforts. For example, personal education such as homework occurs outside the formal class and within the context of everyday life (Lindeman, 1928/1961). One of the central components of education is that of reflection, especially critical reflection (Brookfield, 1985a, b; Candy, 1991). Essentially, self-direction is the natural way that adults learn (Knowles, 1984).

SDL is the natural way for these students to learn (Knowles, 1984), and this personal learning is evident in a variety of cultures (Lamdin, 1997). SDL is more than an activity of discovery or homework; it is actually a part of the human experience, and a normal part of each person's life (Confessore, 1992; Roberson, 2003). In essence, when the student becomes serious about finishing the college and getting a job, they also become serious about SDL through homework and extended hours of studying.

Conclusion

As a result of this study we know the main expressed problem of college students in Croatia is time management. The importance of personal leisure time and the value of studying long hours during exam time were also expressed. And, personal learning was seen in long and extended hours of time in the library, studying with others, social interaction during study time, and the importance of taking breaks during the study time.

In addition many of the student's interviews expressed stress over the lack of money, the lack of jobs in their country, and frustration over lack of rapport and acceptance of their teachers.

As a result of this study we can say that SDL is a positive experience based on the student's personal responsibility for carrying out perceived homework. This homework is carried out in a variety of ways, SDL is how the student manages time, and this is balanced by an active social life and free time activity.

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