

Exploring Disengaging and Engaging Behavior of Doctoral Students

Authors : Salome Schulze

Abstract : The delay of students in completing their dissertations is a worldwide problem. At the University of South Africa where this research was done, only about a third of the students complete their studies within the required period of time. This study explored the reasons why the students interrupted their studies, and why they resumed their research at a later stage. If this knowledge could be utilised to improve the throughput of doctoral students, it could have significant economic benefits for institutions of higher education while at the same time enhancing their academic prestige. To inform the investigation, attention was given to key theories concerning the learning of doctoral students, namely the situated learning theory, the social capital theory and the self-regulated learning theory, based on the social cognitive theory of learning. Ten students in the faculty of Education were purposefully selected on the grounds of their poor progress, or of having been in the system for too long. The collection of the data was in accordance with a Finnish study, since the two studies had the same aims, namely to investigate student engagement and disengagement. Graphic elicitation interviews, based on visualisations were considered appropriate to collect the data. This method could stimulate the reflection and recall of the participants' 'stories' with very little input from the interviewer. The interviewees were requested to visualise, on paper, their journeys as doctoral students from the time when they first registered. They were to indicate the significant events that occurred and which facilitated their engagement or disengagement. In the interviews that followed, they were requested to elaborate on these motivating or challenging events by explaining when and why they occurred, and what prompted them to resume their studies. The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Information-rich data were obtained containing visual metaphors. The data indicated that when the students suffered a period of disengagement, it was sometimes related to a lack of self-regulated learning, in particular, a lack of autonomy, and the inability to manage their time effectively. When the students felt isolated from the academic community of practice disengagement also occurred. This included poor guidance by their supervisors, which accordingly deprived them of significant social capital. The study also revealed that situational factors at home or at work were often the main reasons for the students' procrastinating behaviour. The students, however, remained in the system. They were motivated towards a renewed engagement with their studies if they were self-regulated learners, and if they felt a connectedness with the academic community of practice because of positive relationships with their supervisors and of participation in the activities of the community (e.g., in workshops or conferences). In support of their learning, networking with significant others who were sources of information provided the students with the necessary social capital. Generally, institutions of higher education cannot address the students' personal issues directly, but they can deal with key institutional factors in order to improve the throughput of doctoral students. It is also suggested that graphic elicitation interviews be used more often in social research that investigates the learning and development of the students.

Keywords : doctoral students, engaging and disengaging experiences, graphic elicitation interviews, student procrastination

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