Why students don't attend classes. Engagement with learning in an age of uncertainties

Rationale/Introduction

This paper examines undergraduate students' attendance, engagement and commitment to their university studies. Declining class attendance has been of concern to academics for many decades, transcending country, university and discipline. Romer's (1993) seminal work suggested that absenteeism was "rampant" at around 40%, a finding echoed more recently in Clay and Breslow's (2006) observations that only 67% of students attend most of their classes. With materials increasingly available online and with no requirements for attendance the debate is broadened to one of students' *engagement*, that is, the "physical and psychological energies …. devoted to learning" (Astin, 1984). Although the evidence is contradictory, a growing body of literature demonstrates how attendance and engagement have a demonstrable effect upon students' success (Arulampalam et al., 2012), satisfaction and retention (Halpern, 2007). These are key metrics used in compiling university league-tables and so weak attendance patterns and poor engagement have implications for universities' survival.

Existing research has typically been large-scale and quantitative (for example, Bekhradnia, 2009), thereby failing to capture students' own perspectives. Further, the underlying issues of engagement and learning-commitment are under-researched empirically (Noe, et al., 2010). A fresh evaluation is therefore necessary. Thereby, this research examines the realities of students' lives and study through capturing their attitudes, views and behaviours, as it seeks to explain, "*why students don't attend classes*".

Methodological approach

An inductive, multi-method approach was adopted comprising a survey, study-diaries and focus groups. Purposive sampling engaged volunteer participants from across five disciplines to provide a representative mix of academic environments and cultures (Becher & Trowler, 2001) with a total sample size of 206. Qualitative analysis has revealed emergent common themes. The relationships of these themes to key variables, such as discipline, year of study and gender, are being analysed qualitatively and quantitatively.

Conceptual framework

The research adopted an inductive approach. However, various conceptual frameworks are aiding interpretation. These include, disciplinary differences in conceptualisations of learning and teaching (Becher & Trowler, 2001), consumerism within universities (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005) and school truancy (Mortimore & Whitty, 2000). The management literatures of satisfaction-based absenteeism and workplace commitment (Cohen, 2007) provide further insights. Simons et al.'s (2004) 'future-time perspectives' offers particular potential. Building upon the seminal understanding of learning orientations (Biggs, 1987; Entwistle, 1988), Simons et al. propose that 'future-oriented' students are more intrinsically motivated, demonstrate a deeper conceptual thinking, more intensive persistence and better performance.

Key findings

Findings are beginning to emerge, illustrating the complexity of factors affecting students' attendance, and the underlying issues of engagement and learning-commitment. Certain of these findings challenge established assumptions. Such findings reveal, for example, that students were

intrinsically interested in their studies even in 'generalist' fields such as Business Studies and that across the disciplines, students become less motivated to attend and to engage with study through their time at University.

Distinct factors are being found to encourage and to discourage attendance and engagement. Factors encouraging attendance include assessment relevance and opportunities for social interaction and factors discouraging attendance include the influence of the lecturer or teaching and poor scheduling. A significantly lower percentage of the students than expected undertook any paid employment and there is no clear relationship between paid employment and indicated attendance. Similarly, a notable number of participants offered clear evidence of effective management of their social and study lives. There is some indication of students 'learning-the-ropes' of university study and becoming more strategic in their attendance and engagement as the reasons given for attendance or non-attendance change over the years of study.

Conclusion

Respondent students appear to be predominantly motivated to attend by the shorter-term benefits of securing good assessment grades rather than by any longer-term commitment to learning as a changed 'way of being' in the world. This conclusion reinforces ideas that undergraduate education is increasingly seen in solely instrumental terms and not as a worthwhile end in itself. While the small-scale nature of this inquiry limits the generalisability of the findings, within the current context of the marketisation of higher education, insights are provided of value to higher education practitioners and policy-makers.

Future research

By its very nature, this research recruited more motivated and committed students and the views of a wider student body are required to more fully understand the interconnections between students' attendance, engagement and learning-commitment and the various factors that impact upon these.

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