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Learning style, learning climate congruence: What does this mean for the self-efficacy and affective commitment of Australian academics? (0015)

Programme number: F1
Research Domain: Academic Practice, Work and Cultures

Part 1: Abstract

The purpose of the study is to examine whether the congruence between learning style and learning climate influences the self-efficacy and affective commitment of university academics. The research design is quantitative, involving survey research. A non-probability sample of 900 academics from a large Australian university was selected with a response rate of 30.33%. The study found that the congruence between learning style and preferred learning climate influenced the self-efficacy and affective commitment of academics. More specifically, the incongruence between learning style and preferred learning climate lowered the self-efficacy and affective commitment of university academics. These findings pose important implications for academic and faculty managers in the need to devise strategies to identify learning preferences to aid the development and retention of their academics.

(Word count: 123)

Part 2: Outline

The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between learning style and learning climate and to determine how the congruence between learning style and learning climate influences the affective commitment and self-efficacy of university academics.

Individual-organisation congruence is the compatibility between the individual and the organisation (Kristof, 1996). Congruence theories originate from the field of social

psychology, specifically interactional psychology and assume that there is a continuous interaction between the individual and the environment (Downey, Hellriegel, & Slocum, 1975; Holland, 1973; Lewin, 1951; Terborg, 1981) which is linked to positive work outcomes, such as job satisfaction, organisational commitment, identification, and retention (Brigham, DeCastro, & Shepherd, 2007; Cable & Edwards, 2004; Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005; Kristof, 1996; Lauver & Kristof-Brown, 2001; Silverthorne, 2004; VanVianen, 2000; Verquer, Beehr, & Wagner, 2003; Wheeler, Gallagher, Brouer, & Sablynskil, 2007). Such positive outcomes are key issues for universities where the competitive advantage lies in the knowledge and skills of their employees (Alvesson, 2004), where the war for talent is high (Thite, 2004), employees have greater job mobility and are difficult and costly to replace (Wheeler, et al., 2007).

Various content dimensions have been used to operationalise the individual-organisation congruence theory, which specifies individual and organisational characteristics, such as personality, values, goals, climate and culture. This study builds on the current congruence research through using learning style and learning climate to operationalise this theory in an academic context. Learning style relates to how individuals organise and process information (Honey & Mumford, 1986; Kolb, 1976), which according to Boyatzis and Kolb (1995) represents the deep structure of the knowledge that is imparted in knowledge specialties and professions, including academics. Learning climate includes structural elements within the organisation that are used to facilitate learning (Ortenblad, 2002). There are distinct implications in the literature that suggests that learning styles need to be congruent with various elements of the learning environment in order to achieve positive outcomes, such as enhanced learning, performance, achievement, motivation, training efficiency and satisfaction (Buch & Bartley, 2002; Hayes & Allinson, 1993, 1996; James-Gordon & Bal, 2001; Sims, 1983). However, most of the literature that investigates the

congruence between learning style and the learning environment occurs in an educational setting, between students and teachers or trainers, rather than in a university work context.

Self-efficacy and affective commitment were included in this study as there is limited research on their relationships with individual-organisation congruence in an academic context. The constructs are also particularly relevant in an academic context. Bandura (2000) notes that employees with high self-efficacy approach difficult tasks as challenges, are deeply interested in what they do, set high goals and sustain strong commitments. Key attributes for all employees, but especially academics who are highly skilled, well-educated and work in a complex environment. Affective commitment is an individual's emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in an organisation (Meyer & Allen, 1991). Increased pressures, such as work-life balance, unrealistic workload expectations, and higher commitment to the profession, rather than the organisation means that it is important to find ways for academics to development an emotional attachment to the university; one that they are involved with and want to stay with (Benson & Brown, 2007; Deem, 2004; Fisher, 2007) (Benson & Brown, 2007).

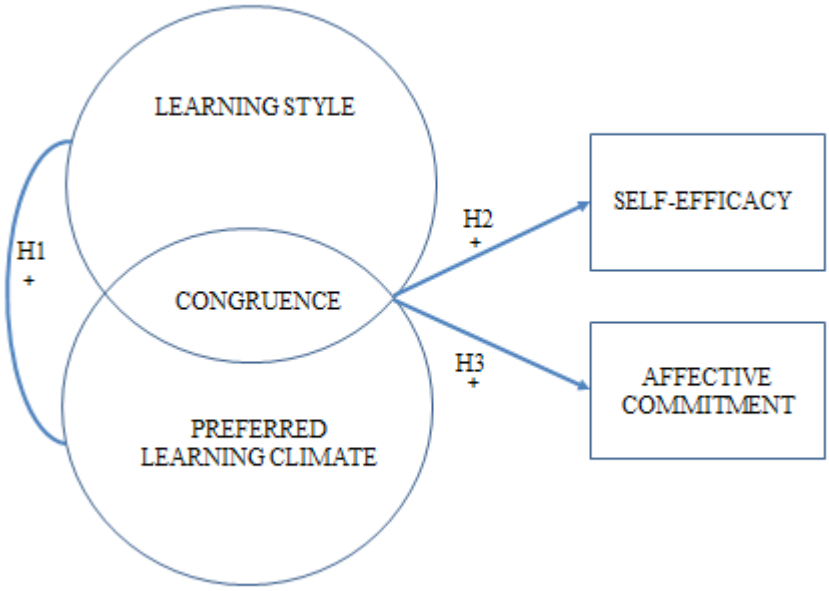
The hypotheses for this study include:

H1: Certain learning styles will prefer different type of learning climates

H2: The congruence between learning style and learning climate will be positively related to the self-efficacy of academics.

H3: The congruence between learning style and learning climate will be positively related to the affective commitment of academics.

Figure 1: Hypothesized relationships between learning style, preferred learning climate, affective commitment and self-efficacy



The strategy of inquiry for this research is quantitative, and involves a non-experimental design using a survey instrument. The data collection instrument is a cross-sectional, self-administered questionnaire. A non-probability sample of 900 university academics was selected from a large public tertiary institute in South East Queensland with five campuses spanning across three cities from Brisbane to the Gold Coast. Two hundred and seventy three university academics returned a completed survey (response rate 30.33%). The constructs in the study were measured used previously validated scales. Learning style was measured using a shortened twenty-eight item scale based on Honey and Mumford's (1986) Learning Style Questionnaire (Four factors, Activist, Theorist, Reflector and Pragmatist). Preferred learning climate was measured using a fourteen item scale based on Pedler, Burgoyne and Boydell's (1991) Learning Climate Questionnaire (Four factors, Learning Resources, Encouragement to Learn, Value of Ideas, Support and Help Available) climates;. Self-efficacy was measured using Chen, Gully and Eden's (2001) eight item scale and affective commitment was measured using Allen and Meyer's (1990) eight-item scale.

Pearson's product-moment correlation and hierarchical linear and multiple regressions were used to assess the congruence between learning style and preferred learning climate congruence and their relationship with self-efficacy and affective commitment.

This study partially confirmed the hypotheses in this study. First, certain learning styles did show preference for certain types of learning climates. Second, the congruence between learning styles and preferred learning climate was negatively related to the self-efficacy and affective commitment of university academics. Academics with an Activist learning style who work in a learning climate where employees are encouraged to experiment and try new things, and where work practices were constantly changing (Learning Resources) experienced lower levels of self-efficacy. Academics with a Theorist learning style who work in a learning climate where employees were encouraged to take risks, learn new tasks, and openly express their ideas and opinions (Encouragement to Learn) experienced lower levels of affective commitment. The findings provide an avenue to augment the development and retention of academics. The analysis of the discrepancies between learning style and preferred learning climate will enable academic and faculty managers to determine ways that learning needs are not being fulfilled. Strategies can then be devised to enhance these learning elements to improve the development and retention of university academics.

(Word count: 981)

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