

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE SELF-REGULATORY BEHAVIOURS OF A GROUP OF YOUNG ADULTS IN A VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING BUSINESS PROGRAM

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Abstract

National Vocational Education and Training (VET) reforms have resulted in an increasing proportion of young adults in VET programs in Western Australia. A challenge for practitioners is to help them develop skills and attributes to facilitate lifelong learning. A need for further research into the self-regulation behaviour of this cohort has been identified.

The primary research question was:

What are the self-regulation behaviours of a group of 18-24 year olds while preparing a business assessment?

Specifically:

What were their help-seeking behaviours?

How did they manage their time and study environment?

This phenomenological study was concerned with understanding self-regulation behaviour as it was perceived by eight VET business students and their teachers. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken after submission of a written task. Quality control was achieved through a combination of data from participant and teacher interviews, and the researcher's interpretations.

The self-regulatory behaviours of these learners were dependent on a range of factors. Findings provide the basis for further research into personality and self-regulation behaviour; learning difficulties and self-regulation behaviour; and the impact of technology distractions on time and effort. This paper outlines the background, methodology, results and conclusions of this investigation.

Introduction

This phenomenological study was concerned with understanding the self-regulatory behaviours of a group of eight 18- to 24-year-old students from a Certificate IV in Business Administration at a Technical and Further Education (TAFE) College in Perth, Western Australia. Semi-structured interviews with the participants and their teachers were undertaken after the submission of a written report. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The raw data were initially coded using broad categories from Pintrich's (2004) theoretical framework. Data were then reduced to clusters of statements and placed into categories. Quality control was achieved through a combination of data from the participant interviews, the teacher interviews and the researcher's interpretations that have been linked to previous research and reviewed through peer debriefing. This paper describes the background, the research objectives, methodology and the results of this study. This is followed by a discussion of the findings and conclusions.

Background

National reform in vocational education and training (VET) and the raising of the school leaving age legislation in Western Australia have resulted in an increasing proportion of young adults enrolling in VET programs. Under new reforms, publicly funded Registered Training Organisations are obliged to give eligible 15- to 24-year-olds priority entrance to training (Department of Education, Employment and Workforce Development, 2011). The transition from school to further education places many demands on young adults, who are often concurrently managing transitions in social roles, physical changes and important career decisions. VET teaching and learning practices are learner-centred, work-centred and attribute-focused. A shift from a teacher-centred approach to a more learner-centred approach can be a major transition for some younger learners (Bandura, 2006). Therefore, the challenge for practitioners is to help these young adults develop the skills and attributes that facilitate self-directed lifelong learning.

The term 'academic self-regulation' is synonymous with self-directed learning; that is, students taking control of their learning. Contemporary VET policy and practice emphasises the full learning potential of individuals and seeks to actively engage them in the planning, development and construction of their own vocational knowledge and skills (Chappell, 2004). While students taking control of their learning, is an important aspect of VET learning environments as well as the changing work environment, findings suggest that VET students are generally not well equipped (Choy & Delahaye, 2005; Cordingley, Lai, Pemberton, Smith & Volet, 1998; Smith & Dalton, 2005). This is supported by Zimmerman (2002) who claims that while educational psychologists and policy makers view academic self-regulation as the key to successful learning in school and further education, most learners struggle to attain this in their methods of study. Pintrich also describes frequent surprise at the number of students who enter college with "very little metacognitive knowledge; knowledge about different strategies, different cognitive tasks, and, particularly, accurate knowledge about themselves" (2002, p. 223).

The self-regulation phenomenon is complex and has been theorised in a number of ways, with "different terms and labels for similar facets of the construct" (Boekaerts, 1999, p. 447). Most theories highlight behavioural, motivational and cognitive processes. Wolters, Pintrich and Karabenick (2003) portray the complexity of academic self-regulation:

... it is not just individuals' cultural, demographic, or personality characteristics that influence achievement and learning directly, nor just the contextual characteristics of the classroom environment that shape achievement, but the individuals' self-regulation of their cognition, motivation and behaviour that mediate the relations between the person, context and eventual achievement. (2003, p.4)

Zimmerman (2002) summed up contemporary self-regulation research by explaining that self-regulation is not a single trait but involves the use of specific processes that must be individually adapted to each task. He states that the degree of students' learning varies according to the absence or presence of any of the following key self-regulatory processes:

...(a) setting specific proximal goals for oneself, (b) adopting powerful strategies for attaining the goals, (c) monitoring one's performance selectively for signs of progress, (d) restructuring one's physical and social context to make it compatible with one's goals, (e) managing one's time use efficiently, (f) self-evaluating ones' methods, (g) attributing causation to results and (h) adapting future methods. (p. 3)

Similarly, Pintrich's (2004) self-regulation model proposes that in order for students to regulate their learning they may access a number of strategies including cognitive learning strategies, metacognitive and regulation strategies, and resource management strategies. Self-regulation involves the development and transfer of self-regulation processes (skills, knowledge and attitude) to different learning situations and contexts, including work and leisure (Boekaerts, 1999).

Social cognitive theorists propose that learning is the result of the interplay of a range of actions, environmental factors and behavioural elements. Learning is social in nature, and can occur through observation and interaction with others (Bandura, 1989). Montalvo and Torres (2004, p. 4) state that students who regulate their learning effectively “perceive themselves as agents of their own behaviour”. They believe that learning is proactive; they are self-motivated and are successful in employing strategies to achieve the desired academic outcomes. Regulation of behaviour, according to Pintrich (2004), involves the individual’s attempt to control their own explicit behaviour. In a learning context, management of time and effort, selecting a suitable study environment and help-seeking are forms of behavioural control.

This study concerned with understanding the self-regulatory behaviours of a group of eight 18- to 24-year-old students from a Certificate IV in Business Administration at a TAFE College was guided by Pintrich’s theoretical framework “Phases and Areas for Self-Regulated Learning” (2004, p. 390). This framework was chosen study because of its global and comprehensive nature and its relevance to VET teaching and learning practices, where students develop their skills in a variety of learning situations and are required to self-manage resources. Methodological issues associated with investigating self-regulation in a teacher-regulated instructional approach, and the need for greater exploration of the development of self-regulatory processes in real learning settings have been considered (Cordingley, Lai, Pemberton, Smith & Volet, 1998; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1994).

Research Objectives

Within the framework of a social cognitive view of learning, this study adopted a phenomenological approach to investigate the self-regulation behaviours of a group of eight 18- to 24-year-old students. This study was concerned with identifying and understanding self-regulation behaviour as it was perceived by a group of students and their teachers. Students’ and teachers’ constructions of their own reality and the researcher’s interpretations were fundamental to answering the research questions (Lester, 1999). The primary research question was:

What are the self-regulation behaviours of a group of 18-24 year olds while preparing a business assessment?

Specifically:

What are their help-seeking behaviours?

How do they manage their time and study environment?

Research Method

A purposive sample group of eight students, three male and five female, aged from 18 to 24, participated in the study. This specific age group was chosen because the researcher believed they would be better able to articulate their learning strategies than younger learners. Participants were full-time Certificate IV Business Administration students. This study was embedded within the context of a simulated consultancy business where students act as employees to undertake group projects as well as individual tasks in order to gain competency in eight units from the certificate. Two teachers act jointly facilitate the business. For this study, as the students came from two different streams, there were a total of four teachers and one was the researcher. The study probed deeply into the characteristics of eight students, and was intended to produce inferences that may suggest ways we can better understand self-regulation behaviour.

Semi-structured interviews with the participants and their teachers were undertaken after the submission of a written assessment task. The task was to be prepared within a two-week timeframe outside of the classroom and submitted to their teachers for marking. Students were directed to research a job role they aspired to and write a report of no more than 1000 words outlining the job and

skills they would require to perform that job. During the research phase, students were expected to establish networks that would be effective in helping them attain their chosen job role and describe these in their report.

Enquiry into the self-regulation behaviours of these students focused on help seeking, time management and management of the study environment. Help-seeking related to the students seeking help independently from the teacher, their peers or anyone else to help clarify and understand the activity (Pintrich, 2004). Strategies for effectively managing time and the study environment included planning and scheduling time and choosing an organised environment free from distraction. The teachers were asked their perceptions of the student's help-seeking behaviours, time management, self-awareness, effort and response to feedback over the 20 week semester.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Initially, the raw data were coded using broad categories from Pintrich's (2004) theoretical framework, then reduced to clusters of statements and placed into specific categories. Clustered statements with labels from the interviews with the students and teachers were written up in narrative form. Synthesis across the cases was achieved by placing individual cases in rows and attributes in columns. By inspecting the columns critical attributes across the cases became more obvious (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Quality control was achieved through a combination of data from the participant interviews, the teacher interviews and the researcher's interpretations; the latter have been linked to previous research and reviewed through peer debriefing.

Three specific limitations were identified in this study. Firstly, it was not established whether participants perceived the teachers as willing to provide help, or whether participants developed relationships with their peers over the semester and worked together on subsequent tasks. Secondly, data on short-term and long-term goals and changes in behaviour on subsequent tasks would have been a valuable contributor to the analysis of motivation and associated behaviour. Thirdly, the impact of internet distractions on regulation of time and effort was not known.

RESULTS

Analysed data from the interview transcripts with the participants and their teachers across the cases is reported under four categories: help-seeking, time management, study environment and self-awareness. The teachers' responses are incorporated within the appropriate category. (See Table 1)

Table 1 – Regulation of Behaviour Subcategories

<i>Participants</i>	<i>Teachers</i>
Help seeking Time management Study environment Self-awareness	Help seeking Time management Feedback response, self-awareness and effort perception

Help Seeking

Participants

Six participants said they sought home help. For two participants, this was in relation to checking their writing.

Eliza: "My boyfriend read it and he's the only other person. I wanted to be sure that I was doing the right thing."

Helen: "My mum is a great help, she is big on literacy. She is the one who reads my work, sometimes."

For four participants home help was in relation to establishing networks. For example:

Colin: "I asked my mum about the contacts so that would help me with future jobs."

Gary: "I got most of my personal contacts from Dad and yeah I think it just helped me gather information."

Two participants said they sought help from peers specifically to check they were doing the task correctly.

Donna: "Towards the end I checked with Lucy to see if she was doing the same thing that I should have been doing. I did what I thought was right and asked her if it is the same."

Frank: "We were trying to figure what was the best way to do it (the mind map)."

Five participants stated that they did not seek any additional help from the teacher for this assessment task, and four of the five participants gave reasons.

Frank: "This assessment was mostly pretty straightforward".

Gary: "Sometimes I was confused but nothing I couldn't figure out by myself."

Colin: "I didn't really talk to anyone in my class about it or the teachers, because mainly I did most of the report at home".

Donna: "Only if I didn't understand something and if Lucy didn't understand it."

Three participants said that they sought additional help from the teachers for the report writing, and one participant also sought assistance from a different teacher.

Barbara: "I did ask the teacher how best to set out my report. I usually try and get another person to have a look at it to see if they understand. The teacher within my computing class was happy to do it. She fixed up my grammar and my spelling."

Eliza: "I had to ask the teacher if I was unsure."

Helen: "I read and try and get feedback from you."

Teachers

The teachers were asked to comment on the participants' degree of help-seeking; this was generally in relation to teacher expectations, forthcoming assessments or clarification of feedback over the 20 weeks. Analysis of teachers' comments revealed that three participants, Eliza, Frank and Helen, consistently sought help, while one participant, Barbara, sought help most of the time, and three participants, Donna, Angela and Gary, occasionally sought help. The teachers could not recall one participant, Colin, ever seeking their help. They also commented that one participant, Eliza, sought additional help through the college for her written expression.

Time Management

Participants

The participants were asked how they budgeted their time for this assessment. Three participants described how they spaced it out over time, and two participants said they did it when they had free time. One participant said he prepared his assessment when he felt like it, another prepared it on the days not at college, and another did some preparation in class time.

Teachers

The teachers were asked to comment on participants' consistency in getting their assessments in on time over the 20 weeks. Analysis of teachers' responses revealed that six participants, Barbara, Colin, Donna, Eliza, Frank, and Helen, were mainly consistent in getting their assessments in on time. The teachers commented that although one participant, Helen, was mainly consistent, she always seemed "rushed". Two participants, Angela and Gary, were inconsistent in their time management. The teachers commented that one participant, Angela, had been absent from some classes due to personal circumstances and this had affected the consistency in getting her assessments in on time. According to the teachers, although one Frank mostly got his assessments in on time he "frequently got into some

stress with time management. He couldn't sort himself out. He was all over the place." The teachers commented that one participant, Eliza, had managed her time well enough to "accommodate time away in Switzerland during semester."

Study Environment

Participants

Seven of the eight participants said they prepared this assessment in their home while one participant, Barbara, used the college library. Six participants chose the environment because it was quiet and free from distractions and three of these participants chose the environment because it was equipped with the resources. For example:

Colin: "I can't really do it at TAFE, it's too noisy and I don't really feel like doing it at TAFE."

Donna: "I do it usually at home in the kitchen away from the TV where I don't get distracted."

Eliza: "It's a quiet environment and I am usually at home alone, my boyfriend was working and I had all the space I needed."

Self Awareness

Participants

Five participants portrayed an awareness of their time management.

Eliza: "I started early to write e-mails because I was worried that people wouldn't respond to me quickly and I think I wasn't stressed in the end. I had to wait for all the e-mails to be responded and meanwhile I was writing about the skills."

Gary: "I didn't use any timeline for it, I just did my work whenever I felt like it and if I got bored I'd take a break."

Angela: "I found it relatively easy because I did it in the space of a week."

Helen: "I get started straight away, I can't leave it. I usually do it on days that I'm not at TAFE, days where I've got a full day to concentrate."

Barbara: "I was running a bit late with this submission so I came to TAFE early. I was in the library, because I knew if I was home, I'd be distracted."

Three participants described an awareness of competing interests and two of these participants described cramming.

Colin: "I did get it in on time but it was kind of left until the last minute. They did give us three assessments at the same time, so I had to focus on other assessments. I am doing a part-time Japanese course, Cert IV as well. I have to do assessments for that."

Frank: "I work three days and am at TAFE three days, I only get Sundays to do assessments. I ended up cramming a lot of it in on the Monday beforehand."

Angela: "It was hard because it was given at the same time as the group one, so you sort of had to balance it."

One participant described cramming as her preferred learning style.

Donna: "Usually I leave it till the last couple of days before the assessment is due. That way I am more motivated. I know I have to get it done because I know I don't have that much time left so I have to get it all done in one day. If I've got time, if it's not due the next day, sometimes I leave it."

Feedback Response

Teachers

The teachers were asked about the participant's response to feedback on their assessments over the 20 weeks. Analysis of teachers' responses revealed that seven participants responded positively to feedback. The teachers provided the following additional comments:

(Helen): "Definitely demonstrated improvement after feedback."
(Colin): "Excellent when he realised he couldn't just stuff around."
(Frank): "He was intense."

One participant, Barbara, responded poorly to feedback. One of her teachers commented "when it came to feedback, she wasn't prepared to put in the effort to pass." Both teachers suspected this participant had a learning difficulty, "possibly undiagnosed dyslexia."

Self-Awareness and Effort Perception

Teachers

The teachers were asked about their perceptions of the participants' self-awareness in relation to their academic performance over the 20 weeks. Analysis of these results revealed that the teachers perceived five participants, Angela, Eliza, Donna, Helen and Colin, to be self-aware most of the time. For example:

(Angela): "She made an assumption that she had put enough effort in to justify a successful result, in other words, competence."
(Colin): "It was a hands off self-assurance attitude that he had at times. He knew to what levels that he could take stuff, to just be right."
(Helen): "She knew when she had put in a poor effort."

The teachers said that one participant, Barbara, was occasionally aware but without action. "She said that she was terrible at writing but she wasn't aware to the point of trying to do something about it." The teachers felt that one participant, Frank, had an inaccurate self-awareness and they attributed this to his "very intense self doubt." The teachers said it was difficult to comment on the self-awareness of one participant, Gary.

The teachers were asked to consider how much effort they perceived the participants had put into assessments over the 20 weeks. Analysis of teachers' responses revealed that three participants, Angela, Barbara and Eliza, had put in sufficient effort, while four participants, Colin, Donna, Gary and Helen, had given minimal or just enough to pass.

One participant, Frank, consistently put in effort the teachers considered over and above that required for his assessments. "He did well in assessments because he was meticulous." Two participants, Eliza and Angela, sometimes put in effort that was over and above that required. The teachers said that although one participant, Barbara, had put a fair amount of effort into her assessments, "a learning difficulty may have impacted."

The teachers made the following additional comments on three of the four participants who were inclined to do just enough to pass their assessments:

(Colin): "He knew what levels that he could take stuff to, to just be right. He did enough to pass but sometimes he didn't quite."
(Donna): "Her goal seemed to be to be to pass."
(Gary): "He put in minimal and often just enough to pass."

DISCUSSION

A key self-regulation strategy is help seeking. A large body of research supports that good students are more likely to seek help from others including peers and teachers in order to understand or clarify a task (Pintrich, 2004; Schunk, 2008; Zimmerman & Risemberg, 1997). Zimmerman claims that self-regulated learners are not asocial:

What defines them as 'self-regulated' is not their reliance on socially isolated methods of

learning, but rather their personal initiative, perseverance, and adoptive skill. Self-regulated students focus on how they activate, alter, and sustain specific learning practices in social as well as solitary contexts. (2002, p. 70)

Although writing is mostly solitary in nature, social influences still play an important role in self-regulatory processes. According to Zimmerman and Risemberg (1997, p. 95) studies of professional writers have revealed that writers rely on others to “learn new techniques, to provide information regarding topics, to provide feedback to assist revisions”. However, they caution that the shift of novice writers from dependence on others to “self-regulated interdependence” can sometimes be an issue.

According to the teachers all except one participant sought help to varying degrees over the 20 week semester. For this assessment task, however, over half of the participants stated that they did not seek any additional help from teachers or peers. This assessment task concerned the individual and was not considered difficult by some of the participants and their teachers. It therefore could be inferred that students are only likely to seek help given the equivalent level of need.

Joseph points out:

Some adolescents are successful self-regulated learners who approach classwork with determination and confidence. They demonstrate introspective skills as they analyse their assignment and find a way to work through their questions. Other students, by contrast, are passive, dependent learners who rely on the teacher or on other students to assist rather than on their own abilities to resolve difficulties. (2010, p. 38)

Research suggests that help-seeking orientation is multifaceted and linked to motivation, achievement goals and use of learning strategies. Help-seeking is labelled in the literature as “adaptive” and “maladaptive” (Newman 2000; Pintrich, 2004). Adaptive help seeking is when the learner is focused on learning and seeks out help with difficult aspects of a task. According to Schunk (2008, p. 509) “The most adaptive type of help seeking is that which provides feedback on learning and progress” and students should be encouraged by their teachers to seek assistance for the purpose of developing their academic skills. Maladaptive help seeking is when the learner seeks an answer in order to complete a task quickly and without much effort. Maladaptive help-seeking can also be present when a learner avoids seeking help. Poor self-perception can lead to help-seeking avoidance because the learner fears looking dumb in front of the teacher (Newman, 2000).

Two participants, Eliza and Helen said they sought help with their writing from people at home as well as from their teachers and this was consistent with the teachers’ comments that these two students always sought their help. However, Eliza and Helen demonstrated very different types of help-seeking behaviours.

Eliza, an international student who struggled with the English language demonstrated characteristics of an adaptive help-seeker. According to her teachers, she was self-aware and this was evident in her action to independently pursue support classes to improve her written English. She also sought additional assistance from her teachers to support her learning. She put a lot of effort into her assessments and the teachers said she managed her time well to “accommodate a time away in Switzerland”. Her comment also suggested she was strategic in her approach to time management: “I started early to write e-mails because I was worried that people wouldn’t respond to me quickly and I think I wasn’t stressed in the end”.

Helen, on the other hand, demonstrated the characteristics of a less effective learner. According to her teachers she definitely demonstrated improvement after feedback and was well aware of when she had put in a poor effort. One of her teachers commented “she was capable, but she seemed to rush things a lot”. They felt that she put in just enough effort to pass her assessments. Reflecting on her

performance for this submission Helen admitted “I know that I can focus a lot harder”. It could be inferred that this learner was dependent on her teachers’ feedback.

Although many of the participants said they received help from home, it was difficult to label this a help-seeking characteristic because the task itself directed the learner to gather information through networking with friends and family. Help-seeking as a self-regulatory characteristic is more concerned about self-awareness and having the strategic knowledge to take corrective action in order to understand or clarify a task. Newman (2000, p. 366) refers to research that proposes help-seeking behaviour changes as children mature and some students, typically high achievers, become more self-regulated in their learning while other students, typically low achievers, become passive or disengaged. The social interactive context can also have a significant influence over help-seeking behaviours. It was not established in this study whether the participants perceived the teachers as willing to provide help, or whether the participants developed relationships with their peers over the semester and worked together on subsequent tasks. In addition, it was not known whether the learners avoided seeking help from their teachers.

Help seeking behaviours are prompted by different motivational patterns (Schunk, 2008) and Boekaerts (1999, p, 454), referring to Pintrich’s model of self-regulation, states “an adaptive profile of motivational beliefs is essential to profit from learning environments which target self-regulated learning”. In an attempt to elucidate motivational patterns, teachers’ perceptions of participants’ response to feedback, self-awareness and effort were examined. The main purpose of feedback is to reduce the gap between current understanding and the required performance or goal. It is the teachers’ role to identify any gaps between the students’ current performance and the required performance and provide instruction and suggest actions to address those deficiencies (Curtis, 2010). The assessment task in this study provided one piece of evidence towards a unit of competency, “Establish Networks”. Students were given an opportunity to re-submit their assessment in response to the teacher’s feedback. This type of feedback is formative and “takes into account the progress of each individual, the effort put in and other aspects of learning that may not be specified in the curriculum...” (Harlen & James, 1997, p.372).

Over the 20 weeks the teachers said that all participants except Barbara responded to feedback positively and with action. One of Barbara’s teachers commented “when it came to feedback, she wasn’t prepared to put in the effort to pass”. On the other hand, the teachers felt that she had put a fair amount of effort into some of her assessments and was occasionally self-aware but without action. “She said she was terrible at writing but she wasn’t aware to the point of trying to do something about it”. Barbara said she sought help from her teachers as well as a teacher from a different class with her writing. She admitted:

“I hadn’t done reports since I was in Year 12... I wasn’t very good, I never really understood the concept of report writing, so I found that quite difficult”.

These results infer that although this participant was self-aware she had trouble translating this awareness into specific strategies to monitor progress, problem solve or make adjustments which is consistent with a suspected learning difficulty (Butler, 1998).

Frank was one of two students who according to his teachers, consistently put in effort over and above that required. “He did well in assessments because he was meticulous”. According to his teachers he consistently sought clarification from them and responded with action to any feedback they gave him. In fact they said that he was “intense” when seeking feedback. He was very self-aware of his learning style and told his teachers that he would function better in a more structured environment. The teachers felt he often underestimated his ability and they attributed this to his “very intense self doubt”. From the teachers’ comments it could be inferred that this learner was dependent on feedback which was strongly linked to his personality. Frank’s dispositional worry and anxiety highlights a relationship between personality and self-regulation. In attempting to understand individual differences in adaptation, Matthews, Schwean, Campbell, Saklofske and Mohamed (2000, p. 201)

discovered that “self-regulative processing is prone to ‘cognitive distortions’ and biases in appraisal of self and of external demands”.

According to the teachers all participants, except Eliza and Frank, were only prepared to put in minimal effort or just enough to pass their assessments. For example the teachers said that Colin’s response to feedback was “excellent when he realised he couldn’t just stuff around. We consider him an intelligent and capable learner. He did enough to pass but sometimes he didn’t quite.” The teachers said Angela “made an assumption that she had put enough effort in to justify a success result, in other words, competence”, Donna’s “goal seemed to be to pass” and Gary gave “minimal and often just enough to pass”.

Many researchers agree that for most students “assessment is something that is done to them and they are passive subjects of it” (Curtis 2010, p. 9). The findings from this study could certainly be interpreted similarly. VET practitioners would benefit from using feedback strategies that give learners a more central and active role in the feedback process to empower them to monitor and regulate their own performance, and to develop self-regulation strategies that help prepare them for lifelong learning (Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick, 2006).

Managing time is a crucial skill for all learners. In this study each learner allocated time on this task differently and this was dependent on a range of factors including competing interests, personal circumstances and learning styles. Competing interests included employment, extracurricular study and a need to balance this task with other tasks. Overall, the teachers’ felt that the learners mostly got their assessments in on time with some more consistent than others.

Frank was very self-aware of his time management and made the following self-assessment, “I work 3 days and am at TAFE 3 days, I only get Sundays to do assessments. I ended up cramming a lot of it in on the Monday beforehand”. Judging from the teachers’ comments, Frank was able to accurately reflect on his time and effort but did not alter his behaviour: “He frequently got into some stress with time management. It took him three times longer than anyone else, he couldn’t sort himself out. He was all over the place.” Other participants also made judgements of their time and effort on this task. For example:

“I did get it in on time but it was kind of left until the last minute. They did give us three assessments at the same time, so I had to focus on other assessments. I am doing a part-time Japanese course, Cert IV as well. I have to do assessments for that”. Colin

“I didn’t use any timeline for it, I just did my work whenever I felt like it and if I got bored I’d take a break.” Gary

The results infer that these participants each had their own priorities whilst studying, with several working part-time. This placed constraints on their time and effort. This finding is consistent with Choy and Delahaye’s (2005, p. 2) whose research project of 18-24 year olds in TAFE and first year university found that “most youth use a surface approach to learning largely due to time constraints, overwhelming volume of content and assessment requirements that reward outcomes achieved through a surface approach.” Pintrich (2000) claims that reflection on time and effort spent on tasks is an important aspect of self-regulated learning. It can lead to a change in future effort and time management or even a change in future study. In the classroom, time set aside for occasional reflection on what is working and what is not could be valuable in feeding back into improved approaches to tasks. Accuracy of self-knowledge or self-awareness is crucial and Pintrich states “If students do not realize they do not know some aspect of factual, conceptual, or procedural knowledge, it is unlikely they will make any effort to acquire or construct new knowledge” (p. 222).

The students were required to regulate their own assessment preparation environment for this task. Pintrich states:

Monitoring of their study environment for distractions (music, TV, talkative friends or

peers) and then attempts to control or regulate their study environment to make it more conducive for studying (removing distractions, having an organised and specific place for studying) can facilitate learning and seems to be an important part of self-regulated learning. (2000, p. 471)

The majority of participants said they had a specific place in their home where they prepared their assessments and chose this environment because it was quiet and free from distractions, or because it was equipped with the resources. The results infer that these students attempted to monitor their study environment. However, it would be interesting, if not essential, to investigate the impact of internet distractions on regulation of time and effort. According to Xu:

Recently, concern over homework distraction has been growing, as new electronic media have offered diverse and nearly ubiquitous forms of diversion to students while they are doing homework. It is surprising to note, however, that a systematic examination of a broad spectrum of factors that contribute to homework distraction is noticeably absent from much contemporary literature (2010, p. 1937).

An inference from the findings in this study is expressed well by Kaplan (2008, p. 483), “currently students do not adopt learning as their main purpose of engagement in school. Despite its common use in the literature, it seems that types of ‘self regulated achievement’ are much more prevalent than types of ‘self regulated learning’”. Indeed, Pintrich (2000, p. 493) queries “Is this still adaptive self-regulation because it is in the service of the student’s own goals?” Data on short-term and long-term goals of the participants and changes in behaviour on subsequent tasks would have been a valuable contributor to the analysis of motivation and associated behaviour in this study.

CONCLUSION

In this study, each learner had his or her own priorities and this no doubt placed constraints on time and effort. With many consciously operating on a minimal effort principle, it is likely that the self-regulation strategies that these students were able to use, and the strategies they were prepared to use, differed. It is crucial that students are empowered to monitor and regulate their own performance, and VET practitioners should be encouraged to employ strategies that give learners a more central and active role in the feedback process.

Understanding the self-regulation behaviours of this group is important for improved teaching and learning practices in VET. Themes that have emerged from this research provide the basis for further research into self-regulation behaviour and academic achievement. What became evident in this study was the relationship between personality and self-regulation styles; for instance, the progress of one of the learners was affected by intense anxiety and self-doubt. This clearly signifies the need for more research into the relationship between personality and self-regulation to behavioural outcome measures. Practitioner education programs to help with the early identification and intervention of students with learning difficulties would also be beneficial. Although nearly all participants said they had a suitable study environment in their home, the impact of technology distractions on time and effort should be investigated.

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