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Learning approaches and academic experiences in university pedagogy students

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Abstract

Learning approaches and academic experiences are constructs of utmost relevance in the student's educational process. With the purpose of building a solid theoretical corpus, this study is carried out, the objective of which is to analyze the association that exists between these variables to understand the difficulties in learning in the university environment. The design was a basic associative type, collecting data from 472 university students of both sexes, using two instruments: the revised study processes questionnaire (R-CPE-2F), and the academic experiences questionnaire (QVA-R). The results show that these variables have a direct relationship ($r=0.486$) with a significance level of 0.000. It has also been shown that the deep approach has a greater relationship with attitudes towards study and the professional project, while the superficial approach has a greater relationship with personal well-being and interpersonal relationships. It is concluded that the experiences experienced by students as part of their process of adaptation to academic life are complex, but at the same time, they are important predictors in the adoption of preferences, ways and personal perspectives to learn, constituting an important finding. to promote deep learning approaches and improve the academic quality of future professionals.

Keywords: Learning approaches; academic experiences; deep approach; superficial approach; attitudes towards studying.

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Enfoques de aprendizaje y vivencias académicas en estudiantes universitarios de pedagogía

Resumen

Los enfoques de aprendizaje y vivencias académicas son constructos de suma relevancia en el proceso formativo del estudiante. Con el propósito de construir un corpus teórico sólido, se realiza este estudio cuyo objetivo es analizar la asociación que existe entre estas variables para comprender las dificultades en el aprendizaje del ámbito universitario. El diseño fue asociativo de tipo básico, recogiendo datos de 472 estudiantes universitarios de ambos sexos, mediante dos instrumentos; el cuestionario revisado de procesos de estudio (R-CPE-2F), y el cuestionario de vivencias académicas (QVA-R). Los resultados evidencian que estas variables tienen una relación directa ($r=0,486$) con un nivel de significancia de 0,000. También se ha evidenciado que el enfoque profundo tiene mayor relación con las actitudes hacia el estudio y el proyecto profesional; mientras que el enfoque superficial tiene mayor relación con el bienestar personal y las relaciones interpersonales. Se concluye, que las vivencias experimentadas por los estudiantes como parte de su proceso de adaptación a la vida académica, son complejas, pero al mismo tiempo, son predictores importante en la adopción de preferencias, modos y perspectivas personales para aprender, constituyendo un hallazgo importante para promover enfoques profundos de aprendizajes y mejorar la calidad académica de los futuros profesionales.

Palabras clave: Enfoques de aprendizaje; vivencias académicas; enfoque profundo; enfoque superficial; actitudes hacia el estudio.

Introduction

In the academic literature, learning approaches are defined as the ways, modes, or strategies that students employ when engaging in their academic activities (Biggs, 1989; Takase et al., 2019; Entwistle, 2021; Freiberg & Vigh, 2021; Hernández et al., 2021; Ampuero, 2022). This theory emerged in the 1970s with authors such as Marton & Säljö (1976), who proposed the SAL (Student Approaches to Learning) theory, which has gained significant acceptance (Abalde et al., 2001). It differentiates itself from other classical concepts by dividing learning into two strategies, deep and surface learning, which are described as flexible, changing, and/or adaptable strategies depending on the student and their context (Coffield et al., 2004). This perspective not only considers the processes and strategies but also emphasizes

the results in terms of understanding and remembering (Marton & Säljö, 1976).

The deep approach refers to the way students strive to deepen their knowledge, seeking various strategies to understand the subject due to intrinsic motivation. On the other hand, the surface approach refers to methods of acquiring mechanical knowledge based on memorization and literal reproduction, without deep analysis and minimal use of cognitive resources, where students are driven by more extrinsic motivations (Biggs, 1989; Freiberg & Vigh, 2021).

Studying learning approaches today stems from the lack of strategies, inflexible styles without a future perspective, and inadequate environments (Abreu et al., 2018); deficiencies in knowledge organization (Freiberg-Hoffmann et al., 2021); and low academic performance (Freiberg-Hoffmann, Fernández-Liporace & Uriel, 2022). These

issues are driven by various factors, such as low teacher expectations (Marchant, González & Fauré, 2018; Natoli et al., 2022), prioritizing the progress of the academic cycle over learning (Freiberg and Vigh, 2021; Mercado-Guerra, Calderón-Carvajal & Palominos-Urquieta, 2022), and rigid teaching and assessment styles (Yin, Wang & Han, 2016).

All these concerns lead to thinking about learning from a different, more flexible perspective that considers both the individual and the context. In this regard, according to Marton & Säljö (1976), learning approaches study students' perceptions of academic activities, which are influenced by motivational and contextual factors. Additionally, they are related to academic experiences, which include the beliefs, opinions, feelings, and experiences that students have regarding their daily life at university (Almeida, Gomes & Soares, 1999; Borzone, 2017).

The academic experiences of students from the time they enter university symbolize a complex and highly stressful process (Morales & Chávez, 2017), as at this level of study they face demands to which they were not accustomed (Almeida, 2007). Therefore, they must adapt to institutional norms, interactions with their peers, and the demands of their teachers for adequate performance (Tochetto, Schaurich & Garcia, 2016). Cervero et al. (2021) state that adaptation problems always cause imbalances in many aspects of life and sometimes lead students to drop out of their studies and/or achieve low performance. They also generate socio-emotional problems such as stress, anxiety, and emotional burnout.

To minimize this issue, Bandeira & Castro (2021) suggest that it is important to intervene during the first year of enrollment, as this period is crucial for both the student's retention in the institution and their academic success. Johnston (2013) argues that during the first year at university, students should encounter positive stimuli, such as satisfaction of their expectations, achieving high performance standards through effort and commitment, training for job placement, and ensuring continuous education.

Therefore, institutions must commit to meeting these expectations and to forming responsible, creative, competent, and committed citizens (Rodríguez, 2008), so that they can better generate, accumulate, and distribute knowledge and subsequently train others to act as responsible citizens in a welfare society (Hernández et al., 2005).

Among the factors that allow for analyzing students' academic experiences are, according to Bahamondes & Salazar (2017); and Borzone (2017), personal well-being, which refers to physical and psychological perception, as well as beliefs in self-efficacy, self-confidence, and self-esteem. A second dimension relates to interpersonal relationships, referring to the building of friendships with various academic actors, peers, and teachers.

A third element is the professional project, understood as the proper adaptation to university, vocation for the chosen career, and professional outlook. The fourth element is attitudes towards studying, referring to the evaluation of competencies, study habits, time management, and the organization of materials and learning resources. Finally, there is involvement with the institution, understood as identity, interest, desire to continue the career, and the quality of the services and infrastructure that the university possesses, which supports their education.

In this way, understanding and intervening in both learning approaches and academic experiences could address deficiencies in performance and the quality of professional training. Therefore, the objective of the study is to analyze the association between these two variables and their dimensions in a sample of university students in pedagogy.

1. Methodology

The study was conducted using a quantitative approach and a correlational design. This design aims to measure the degree of association between two variables (Huairé et al., 2022); in this case, it measures the

relationship between learning approaches and academic experiences.

To conduct the research, probabilistic sampling was used, meaning the participants were selected randomly. The sample consisted of 472 students of both sexes, 354 women and 118 men, aged between 16 and 25 years. All participants are pedagogy students from a public university in Lima, Peru.

Regarding data collection, two questionnaires were used: The Revised Two-Factor Study Process Questionnaire (R-CPE-2F), developed and validated by Biggs, Kember & Leung (2010), which was adapted for Argentine and Peruvian samples by Freiberg-Hoffmann et al. (2021). This questionnaire contains 20 items measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5, where 1 = Never true or rarely true; 2 = Sometimes true; 3 = Half the time true; 4 = Frequently true; and 5 = Always or almost always true.

The scale is divided into two factors, with 10 items for the deep factor (1, 2, 5, 6, 9, 10, 13, 14, 17, 18) and 10 items for the surface factor (3, 4, 7, 8, 11, 12, 15, 16, 19, 20). For this study, with a pilot sample of 30 students, the instrument proved reliable with overall scores of 0.844, 0.790 for the deep approach, and 0.838 for the surface approach.

Likewise, the Academic Experiences Questionnaire (Almeida et al., 1999) was used, which evaluates students' experiences and feelings. It consists of 60 items measured through a five-alternative Likert scale where 1 = Does not relate to me at all; 2 = Relates to me a little; 3 = Sometimes agree and sometimes disagree; 4 = Very related to me; and 5 = Always related to me.

The scale consists of five dimensions: Personal well-being with 13 items (4, 9, 11, 13, 17, 21, 23, 26, 28, 39, 45, 52, and 55); Interpersonal relationships with 13 items (1, 6, 19, 24, 27, 30, 33, 36, 38, 40, 42, 43, and 59); Professional project with 13 items (2, 5, 7, 8, 14, 18, 20, 22, 37, 51, 54, 56, and 60); Attitude towards studying with 13 items (10, 25, 29, 31, 32, 34, 35, 41, 44, 47, 49, 53, and 57); and Institutional involvement with 8 items (3, 12, 15, 16, 46, 48, 50, and 58). For this

study, the instrument also showed adequate levels of reliability through a pilot sample of 30 participants, with values of 0.917 for the overall instrument; 0.817 for personal project; 0.844 for interpersonal relationships; 0.829 for professional project; 0.890 for attitudes towards studying; and 0.644 for institutional involvement.

To administer the instruments, prior arrangements were made with the course instructors during their respective class schedules, informing them of the study's objectives. They, in turn, could explain the study to their students and encourage their participation. Subsequently, the two questionnaires were sent to all participants via Google Forms through emails and WhatsApp. Once the data were obtained, they were analyzed using SPSS 26 software.

2. Results and discussion

Learning approaches constitute students' preferences, modes, and personal perspectives for learning. In this context, the frequencies at which the participant group is positioned are described as follows: 17 (3.6%) are at the low level, meaning they do not have a defined learning approach, possibly resulting in inadequate performance; 405 (85.8%) of the participants are at a medium level, indicating that the majority of these students adopt different strategies depending on the moment or context, but do not have a defined approach. Only 50 (10.6%) have a high level or are positioned with a specific learning approach.

Academic experiences, which are ways of living, adapting, and being at the university, valued based on students' opinions and feelings, reveal that 7 (1.5%) participants still face difficulties in adapting to university, which could be affecting their performance; 450 (90.0%) of the students. The majority, however, are not entirely satisfied with their experiences, indicating that they still encounter some challenges in their academic and life-learning processes; and finally, 40 (8.5%) have adapted normally and have adequate experiences, reflecting good professional performance.

In terms of inferential results, there is evidence of a direct relationship between learning approaches and academic experiences, indicating that academic experiences play a significant role in the adoption of a particular learning approach. The value of $r=0.486$ (see

Table 1) suggests that, while there is a direct relationship, there are other factors influencing the formation of one approach over another. However, nearly 50% of the relationship is explained by the experiences each individual has in their university life.

Table 1
Correlations between main variables

		Academic Experiences
Learning Approaches	Pearson's Correlation	0.486**
	Sig. (bilateral)	0.000
	N	472

Note: **. The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

Source: Own elaboration, 2024.

The analysis of the dimensions of each variable in Table 2 has revealed important findings regarding the formation of deep and surface learning approaches. These results indicate that the deep learning approach is primarily promoted by two factors of academic experiences: Attitude towards studying and personal project, with some contribution

from interpersonal relationships. On the other hand, the surface learning approach is mainly supported by personal well-being, with lesser contributions from interpersonal relationships and institutional involvement. This suggests that there are distinct factors influencing the promotion of each learning approach among students.

Table 2
Relationship between dimensions of academic experiences and study process

		Deep Approach	Superficial Approach
Personal Well-being	Pearson's Correlation	-0.023	0.336*
	Sig. (bilateral)	0.621	0.000
Interpersonal Relationships	Pearson's Correlation	0.391**	0.194*
	Sig. (bilateral)	0.000	0.000
Professional Project	Pearson's Correlation	0.457**	0.041
	Sig. (bilateral)	0.000	0.373
Attitude towards Studying	Pearson's Correlation	0.522**	0.102*
	Sig. (bilateral)	0.000	0.026
Institutional Implication	Pearson's Correlation	0.290**	0.162*
	Sig. (bilateral)	0.000	0.000
	N	472	472

Note: **. The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed). *. The correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed).

Source: Own elaboration, 2024.

The study results show a direct relationship between learning approaches and academic experiences, findings that are consistent with previous studies (Martínez & Palacios, 2012; Yin et al., 2016; Vela & Cáceres, 2019; Mercado-Guerra et al., 2022), which assert that various motivational and cognitive aspects influence the student training process. This suggests that the formation or adoption of a specific learning approach is mediated not only by motivation or learning styles but also by the context in which the student interacts, their interest in the subject, and their dedication. This is because learning approaches are flexible and regulated based on the context and the needs of the students (Biggs, 1989).

Some studies (Diseth et al., 2006; Marchant et al., 2018; Freiberg & Vigh, 2021; Mercado-Guerra et al., 2022) report how students' lived experiences shape learning approaches, which are further strengthened, even with greater emphasis, in the final stages of their studies.

The data obtained also show that the superficial learning approach has a greater relationship with personal well-being, interpersonal relationships, and institutional involvement, which are important factors in academic experiences. These findings are consistent with what was mentioned by Monroy & Hernández (2014); and Díaz-García et al. (2020), who assert that this approach is more oriented towards external factors of the student, as the purpose of learning is merely to complete the task without establishing deep connections between ideas and personal knowledge (Gargallo, Garfella & Pérez, 2006).

In this approach, students only acquire mechanical, repetitive, and rote learning; they do not have a good disposition to learn (Huairé et al., 2023), and they do not utilize cognitive resources, which is why it is more associated with extracurricular activities than with academic ones (Freiberg-Hoffmann, Vigh & Fernández-Liporace, 2021). For example, Gargallo et al. (2006) found that the correlation coefficient between the superficial approach and grades is low; similarly, Díaz-García et al.

(2020) also found that the superficial approach has a low association with the academic use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT).

Regarding the deep approach, the results showed that this approach is positively associated with professional projects and attitudes towards study, which are factors in academic experiences. These findings are consistent with those of Mercado-Guerra et al. (2022), who found a direct association between the deep approach and performance, as well as progress in studies. Díaz-García et al. (2020) indicate that students at this level aim to achieve more complex learning and attain a deep understanding of the content.

According to Gargallo et al. (2006), the deep approach is based on intrinsic motivation, so the student is aware of what they are learning, and this learning complements their personal and professional project. Additionally, they have a positive attitude towards the subject, so the acquired learning is associated with their prior knowledge, personal experience, and promotes curiosity for continued learning.

Furthermore, this positive association could be related to good teaching by the instructor, as their role is to promote various strategies for students to learn (Natoli et al., 2022); to undergo continuous training (Marchant et al., 2018); to provide good evaluation to students (Yin et al., 2016); and also to provide satisfaction for the achievements attained (Freiberg & Vigh, 2021). Therefore, it is necessary to continue creating research lines on this topic to further deepen our understanding.

Conclusions

Based on the obtained data, it is concluded that learning approaches and academic experiences are continuous processes due to a significant direct relationship between the variables. Therefore, these interrelations would form over time according to each student's experiences and expectations. Academic experiences encompass experiences, feelings, opinions,

and beliefs, and are conditioned by a complex process of institutional adaptation, which, at the same time, is associated with learning approaches. These are complex processes linked to intellectuality, motives, and specific strategies rather than personality aspects.

In the analyses of different approaches, it has been evidenced that the deep approach is more closely related to attitudes towards studying and professional projects. In other words, they are conditioned by a complex process of emotional adaptation to the institution and its new ways of life, where students face challenges that influence the ways in which they pursue their studies.

On the other hand, the superficial approach is more closely related to personal well-being and interpersonal relationships, although the latter is important for both approaches. Therefore, the data confirms that each approach is influenced by different factors; each student, according to their vision and future perspective, forms preferences and ways of approaching academic tasks and activities.

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