

Study Ability Through Engagement

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INTRODUCTION

The Kyky project (2011–2013) is coordinated by the National Union of University Students in Finland (SYL) and part of the ESF-funded Campus Conexus II project. Other project partners include the Aalto University and the University of Tampere and their corresponding student unions. The project aims to establish the promotion of study ability in university communities and improve student integration, student participation and the work of student associations. The development work is conducted in cooperation with the target academic communities.

Promoting Study Ability in Academic Communities

Study ability stands for the work ability of a student; although analysing and defining the concept itself as a comprehensive academic counterpart of work ability only goes ten years back (Kunttu 2011, 34). Study ability relates to learning results, student well-being and study progress. The long term benefits of good study ability extend all the way to working life; good study ability can be seen to predict good work ability and well-being at work. There are numerous ways to support and promote study ability. (Kujala 2011, 154.)

The Finnish Institute of Occupational Health and the Finnish Student Health Service have applied the model for work ability to create a theoretic model to describe study ability (Kunttu 2011, 34). This model for study ability is presented on the next two pages. According to the model, study ability is defined by personal resources, study skills, the teaching and the study environment. Study ability is a dynamic system of factors, all of which affect each other. Students subjected to, for instance, good teaching and a supportive academic community will gain help from these factors when facing motivational problems. The model is based on socio-economic, cultural and environmental conditions and attitudes, all reflecting on a student's study ability in an either positive or negative way. (Kunttu 2011, 34–35.)

There is a need to improve the study ability of students in higher education. From the aspect of student health, the decline of study ability manifests among students as extensive symptoms and mental problems, of which the most common are e.g. tiredness, a constant feeling of being overworked and feelings of depression (Puusniekka & Kunttu 2011, 36). Studies show that sleeping problems, tiredness and social anxiety and nervousness has, in fact, increased during the last decade (Salmela-Aro 2011, 45). The decline of study ability also shows as weak student commitment, slow study progress and unfinished studies (Kouvo et al. 2011; Korhonen & Rautopuro 2012; Mäkinen 2012). There are many ways for the universities to tackle these challenges.

To promote study ability means taking measures to maintain or improve student study ability and the well-being of the academic community by focusing those measures at individuals, communities and their social environment. Study ability can be promoted by influencing all dimensions of study ability (Kunttu 2011, 35), and this work must be a common effort of every member of the academic community (Kujala 2011). Universities have been given the tools to promote study ability and communality in the form of recommendations on how to promote study ability. The recommendations also include various series of best practices regarding the same subject. The study ability recommendations are a useful tool for academic communities to enhance their learning results, improve student study progress and to increase the well-being of both students and the whole academic community. (Kujala 2009; Kujala 2011, 154.)

Study Ability Recommendations

All work done to promote study ability must be systematic and well organised throughout the whole institution and all its communities.

Promoting study ability and the personal study condition must be a part of the general curriculum.

Education and studies must be physically accessible and regard the special needs of students.

Students must be treated with respect and encouraged to participate and their opportunities to influence the environment must be promoted.

Students need to be offered support, guidance and encouragement throughout their studies.

Promoting working life skills and a smooth transition to working life must be included in the curriculum.

Communality must be used for promoting the well-being of the whole academic community; both the study ability of students as well as the work ability of the staff.

Finding Study Ability Through Engagement

The term 'study engagement' describes student motivation. It affects learning results, study progress and student well-being. According to Katariina Salmela-Aro (2011, 43), it will prove very challenging to increase that motivation, as only every third university student experiences so called study engagement. While the study ability model does not separate between study engagement and student motivation, both can be considered important parts of what study ability is all about. The dimensions of study ability – the personal resources, study skills, the environment and teaching and guidance – are all related to study motivation (Korhonen & Hietava 2011, 17–18) and for instance good study skills and fascinating teaching contribute to support the engagement of the student.

Study engagement can be defined as a positive, fulfilling state of mind characterised by study related vigour, dedication and absorption. The same factors are identified and discussed in the theory of work engagement, which the term 'study engagement' can be seen to correspond (Salmela-Aro 2011, 45). Vigour is characterized by high levels of energy, the willingness to invest effort in one's work, and persistence. Dedication stands for experiencing a sense of, for example, significance and enthusiasm. Absorption means concentration in and fulfilment from being engrossed in one's work. (Hakanen 2009, 33.) Striving to fulfill these experiences is important for strengthening the study engagement of students and the academic community (Salmela-Aro 2011, 45).

The term 'study engagement' is included in the concept of positive psychology, a branch of psychology with an approach based on strengths and resources instead of weaknesses and flaws. Study engagement can be used to strengthen the strong sides and resources of students and academic communities, paving communities the way to success and well-being. The theoretical counterpart of study engagement is study related burnout; a condition affecting more than ten per cent of Finnish higher education students. Burnout is the outcome of constant study-induced stress, which can manifest itself as strong feelings of exhaustion, a cynical and detached view of the studies and feelings of inadequacy as a student. Study engagement, self-respect, communality, support and rightful treatment, on the other hand, protect students from fatigue. (Salmela-Aro 2009, 4, 8, 52; 2011, 43–44.)

Introducing The Material

The following part presents four themes consisting of incentives aiming to improve and advance study engagement and study ability in academic communities. The four themes are 1) Engagement and inspiration, 2) Trying and daring, 3) Competent and coping, and 4) Being well and taking care. The themes are structured to best support experiences beneficial to study engagement and to help recognize the central distinctive characteristics of academic studies. The characteristics and distinctive challenges of academic studies include their independent nature, learning the required study skills, and also believing in one's own skills, competence, and future opportunities. (Heikkilä, Keski-Koukkari, Eerola 2011, 32.) Students also need to be aware of the importance of life outside of studies and remember to schedule time for friends, family, sports and recovery. (Heikkilä et al. 2011, 32.)

In order to assist you in starting the discussion, the material includes theme cards and tips for how to use them. The introduction is followed by short descriptions of ideas, practices and models on how to support and improve study engagement and study ability in your community.

1. Engagement and Inspiration

Can you still remember how you felt when you received your letter of admission? Did you feel happy, thrilled, horrified, and proud – or perhaps a combination of these feelings? Have you kept your sense of enthusiasm and pride? Do you still feel thrilled to know that you're going to learn something new? What can we do to harness that engagement as a common resource for the whole community, and make sure to fill even the most accomplished professor's stomach with butterflies in the beginning of a new course?

In her research on study engagement and burnout Katariina Salmela-Aro (2009) has discovered that only 28 per cent of academic students experience study engagement, and that this engagement reduces as the studies progress. So, what happens to that motivated first year student and why is enthusiasm such a rare feature among students? Maintaining your study engagement is also important in the long run: studies show that having good self-esteem, being optimistic, and having an increasingly optimistic view during your studies could indicate good work engagement as far ten years later (Salmela-Aro 2009).

Inspiring, supportive and trusting teachers are one of the most important factors making up a motivating study environment. Does your community support the enthusiasm of its teachers and their work engagement? While teachers are expected to be inspiring and willing to work hard to ensure the learning of every student, even students need to be pushed enough in order to increase and maintain their motivation. Other factors that contribute to student motivation are interesting courses, feelings of success, progress in studies and the feeling of having made the right choices. Factors with a negative impact on student engagement and motivation include difficulties related to scheduling and study techniques, lack of student guidance, and difficult life situations. (Korhonen & Hietava 2011.) The best way to increase and enhance enthusiasm and engagement in academic communities is to invest in support, flexibility and accessibility. And remember; enthusiasm is contagious!

2. Trying and Daring

Do you show your confusion and reveal your ideas? Do the members of your community share their thoughts and ideas? How much effort do you put in, how much trouble do you go through to reach your goals? How could students and teachers expose their skills and what they consider interesting in ways that benefit the whole community? Does your academic community question its thinking and old practices?

Learning something new can take a lot of work, but the really tricky part is unlearning old habits. Studying requires creative work and thought, which means that you need to be persistent and not give up that easily. You need the courage to try, to fail, and to make changes where change is needed. The best places to look for courageous and inspiring examples are communities where both students and teachers are proud of their work: communities where high quality research and high quality teaching form a dynamic, mutually supportive relationship, and where both students and teachers are ready to challenge each other. Is your community one where everyone dares to try? Is everyone free to make their own choices?

Different people get stressed over different things and situations. Some enjoy performing as something completely natural and enjoyable, while others might find some alternative activity easy and inspiring. According to the University Student Health Survey, approximately one in three students suffer from excessive stress, usually stemming from performance stress (Kunttu & Pesonen 2013), on top of which 40 per cent of students also consider stress harmful to themselves (Almonkari 2011, 63).

Universities can be characterised by an ethos of success, a culture where there is no room for asking help or showing signs of weakness. At the same time, new discoveries often require a sense of curiosity and the courage to ask and share your thoughts, which a culture of acceptance and an open atmosphere makes a lot easier. Learning requires persistence and trust in one's own learning and study skills – so called self-leadership – skills that can be learned through studying. Do members of your community have the courage to show off their skills?

3. Competent and Coping

When was the last time you were satisfied with yourself and your work? Have you reached any insights during your studies? Did you find it fulfilling? Do the members of your community believe in their ability to cope and that they are good enough? Does the feedback from your studies make you challenge yourself?

Comparing results and peer competition has always been a part of universities and academic studies. At its best, it can lead to inspire and challenge students to exceed themselves. However, in a worst case scenario it leads to declining study engagement and self-reliance. It's important for students to perceive their skills, believe in their competence, and have faith in the future in order to succeed in their studies. As university studies no longer guarantee you a life of carefree existence, every student must be assisted in finding their place in working life and building positive outlooks. Believing in one's own abilities and skills strengthens student commitment and study engagement (Lindblom-Ylänne 2013; Salmela-Aro 2012).

The fears surrounding the future after graduation can be fought, for instance, by supporting the students' ability to identify their own competences. During their academic studies, students go through their study progress in so called Personal Study Plan (PSP) discussions. Could we consider modifying the PSP-discussions to closer resemble the Development Discussions of working life and assist student self-assessment and career planning? This way, students could find new career dreams and matching academic paths and study modules, and create a clear plan from the very beginning of their studies up until graduation.

The feeling of coping also means that you know how to deal with the many uncertain aspects of your studies and the future. Does your community engage in discussion with the students and the staff regarding the expectations and uncertainties of each community member? Various orientation practices (e.g. pre-semester questionnaires, social media peer groups, the material sent to new

students with their letter of admission) help students to consider their own expectations and discuss them with their student peers and their peer and teacher tutors before the studies actually begin.

The feeling of coping can be strengthened by teaching study skills as part of the curriculum, because even study skills must be learnt and rehearsed during the studies. It is however a very common belief that the academic skills and the techniques and practices needed to learn and study are something you will gain automatically once you've been accepted to study at a university. One way to develop student study and working life skills is to include them in the curriculum, and explicitly show which skills each course is going to discuss and improve.

Even external factors outside of the studies can hasten study progress and strengthen student self-confidence. Studies have revealed that students with a full-time job or a family might progress faster in their studies than those who concentrate all their effort of studying. Having a lot going on in your life requires organising skills. Having those skills simultaneously improves and supports your studies and your study ability (Lindblom-Ylänne 2013). The ability to perceive the academic world and plan your studies, or "play the university game", is a central factor for graduating fast, although there are other contributing factors as well, e.g. student home background (Merenluoto 2009).

4 Being Well and Taking Care

Do you enjoy your daily life and your studies? Do you have the energy to cope? What ways do you have to recover? Do you know what is going on in the life of your student peers or co-workers? Have you found a balance between your studies and the rest of your life? Is the relationship supportive and dynamic? How can you increase your resources?

A safe and open academic community prevents burnout and depression while it also supports the resources of its students. Unfortunately, many students are completely unaware of which academic community they belong to, and many students have only few experiences of talking about their studies with the institution staff (Lindblom-Ylänne 2013; Lähteenoja 2010). It takes a lot of effort from the universities and their curriculum planning in order to make students committed to their studies and the study environment. Do you create learning situations in which students need to interact with each other? The university is responsible for the well-being of its members, including both students and staff. How do you take care of each other in your community?

During recent years, student stress and exhaustion has increased and it has become clear that bullying in universities is more common than expected (Kunttu & Pesonen 2013). Some example signs of having trouble coping with the workload include dissatisfaction towards your own work, feeling that the work is too demanding, problems quickly turning into conflicts, and long working hours. A well-being community, however, will intervene and try to solve these problems. Accessibility and equal treatment means that, for instance, teachers take notice of students with special needs; everyone is welcome at community parties; information is shared in good time and; that the study materials are provided in electronic form.

When you're engaged and enthusiastic, you might get excessively committed. Getting carried away in student association work might lead to forgetting that you need to recover from student life outside of campus and your study environment. The nature of student association work is unique in the manner that there are no clearly defined working hours, fees, or proper job descriptions. Still, every member of that community must remember the things he or she needs in order to distance him- or herself and recover from the academic environment, whether their job is to teach or study.

Everyone needs balance between work and leisure. Do you sleep and eat well, and which activities besides sleeping do you consider to be recharging? Variation is also a key element: it's good to vary your daily or weekly programme, not to forget the importance of taking a leave every now and then! Besides balance and variation, people need to have a good relationship with themselves, know how they are feeling, and do whatever feels relaxing and fulfilling to themselves. (Eerola 2012.)

Tips on How to Develop Your Academic Community

A Student-Centred Learning Culture

Material and support on how to make your learning environment and the teaching 'student-centred'. Taking a student-centred approach means creating a learning culture where teachers function as mentors while giving the students an active role. A student-centred learning environment is based on the approach that learning is a joint effort, not an individual achievement.

Introducing Study Ability to First Year Students

The letter of admission is accompanied by a guide for first year students, welcoming them to the academic world and encouraging them to participate in student activity. The orientation events of the first autumn inform students about study ability and the distinctive characteristics of university studies.

A Course in Supporting Study Ability

A course in study ability offers students an opportunity to work with study ability promoting materials. The course offers students the capacity to understand and develop themselves. Students learn to identify their resources and how to develop the skills needed for best making use of them.

Establishing the Use of 'Thank You' In University Communities

Thankfulness and appreciation inspires and strengthens the community. Tips on how to spread a culture of thankfulness in university communities.

Promoting a Study Culture of Equity and Achievability

The best way to enable a thriving culture of equity and achievability is through including everyone in promoting it. Ideas on how to promote equity and achievability in academic communities.

Integrating International Students

Ideas and training material for academic communities to support the integration of international students, for instance through student association work and tutoring.

Including a Working Life Perspective

Adding a working life perspective to all education creates positive views about the future and motivates students to progress in their studies. Training materials to help students identify their competence and tips on how to include a working life perspective to the education.

Multidisciplinary Working Group for Promoting Study Ability

Student health and well-being is promoted through the work of a multidisciplinary working group consisting of representatives of the university, the Finnish Student Health Service, the congregation's staff for work in educational facilities and representatives of the students. Student well-being and study ability is regularly monitored through reports and follow-ups and frequently discussed at various events and in newspaper articles.

Training Student Associations

Models and materials for student unions for creating and developing inspiring and effective training events.

The Well-Being and Study Ability of Active Student Union Members

Encourage active student union members to take care of themselves and thank and reward them for their hard work. Training materials and tips for maintaining well-being.

Materials to Support Student Commitment

Materials to stir the thoughts of people interested in developing higher education. How and what means to take to increase student participation and commitment towards their higher education studies?

Back from a Break – Support Group for Students Returning to Their Studies

Based on group work, this group activity aims to support students returning to their university studies or students with poor study progress.

Grasping Your Studies – Support Group for Solving Study-Related Problems

A group work-based model for eight students. Consists of seven group meetings at which the students get to apply problem solving approaches to tackle their study problems. Detailed instructions for leading this group are found on the website.

GroupGroup – Work Counselling for University Teachers

A group work-based model for eight teachers. Consists of seven group meetings at which the teachers are taught problem solving working methods and work counselling. Detailed instructions for leading this group are found on the website.

Committing to Studies through Self-Assessment

A web-based self-assessment questionnaire helps students consciously think about their study skills, learning processes and the practices and teaching methods of the surrounding learning environment. It offers students a way to identify different methods as how to develop themselves as learners, a chance to evaluate the meaningfulness of their studies and to identify experiences of participation in their learning environment.

Supporting Learning through Visualisation

Visualisation tools help outline and depict the activities of students and communities in virtual learning environments. Visualising the data collected about student activity in web-based learning environments offers a way to support peer learning, develop one's own learning and follow-up the study progress.

Information Retrieval Guidance at Thesis Seminar

Cooperative learning methods bring out the distinctive characteristics of information retrieval. Detailed working methods for instructors, students and library staff are found on our website.

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