

Understanding Student Engagement in a Professional Development Course



Cade D. Mansfield
University of Wisconsin – Superior



Introduction

- There is increasing emphasis in higher education on career preparation.
- This emphasis is partly realized in courses designed to help students understand specific career options related to their majors and to help students develop job acquisition skills (e.g. resume construction, facility in interviewing).
- Pilot qualitative work in such a senior-level course, *Psychology 300, Professional Development for Psychology Majors*, revealed that future-oriented topics tended to generate curiosity and excitement for some and worry and anxiety for others.
- The curious and excited may be more likely to be engaged than the anxious and worried.
- Given the importance of engagement for learning (Niemic & Ryan, 2009; Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, & Kinderman, 2008) *I sought to understand personality and situational factors that might be associated with course engagement. Do students differ in course engagement and why*
- Because the study was exploratory I did not create a priori hypotheses.

Methods

- **Data collection.** Data were collected across 3 waves in the fall of 2017.
- **Participants.** Twenty-three students enrolled in a course on professional development for psychology majors were invited to participate. Twenty-two students consented. Seventeen students completed all 3 waves of data. Analyses were conducted on those 17 students' data.
- **Wave 1: Personality Measures.** In week 2 students completed self-report measures of Future Time Perspective (Lang & Carstensen, 2002), Implicit Self Theory (DeCastella & Byrne, 2015), aspects of Psychological Well-being (Ryff & Keyes, 1995), and The Big Five Personality Inventory (John & Srivastava, 1999).
- **Wave 2: Situational Measures.** In week 7 students completed measures of Positive and Negative Affect (Watson & Clark, 1994), Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen & Williamson, 1988), Basic Needs in School (Deci, Ryan, Gagné, Leone, Usunov, & Kornazheva, 2001), Perception of instructor engagement, Perception of instructor's care about student development, and degree of engagement in the course (Lam et al., 2014).
- **Wave 3: Situational Measures and Written Narratives.** In week 14 students completed the same measures they completed at wave 2 and also completed written narratives in response to a prompt asking them to reflect on what was most exciting and boring in the class.

References

- Deci, E. L., Ryan, R. M., Gagné, M., Leone, D. R., Usunov, J., & Kornazheva, B. P. (2001). Need satisfaction, motivation, and well-being in the work organizations of a former eastern bloc country: A cross cultural study of self-determination. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 27*(8), 930-942.
- De Castella, K., & Byrne, D. (2015). My intelligence may be more malleable than yours: The revised implicit theories of intelligence (self-theory) scale is a better predictor of achievement, motivation, and student disengagement. *European Journal of Psychology of Education, 30*(3), 245-267.
- John, O. P., & Srivastava, S. (1999). The big five trait taxonomy: History, measurement, and theoretical perspectives. In L. A. Pervin, & O. P. John (Eds.), *2nd ed.; handbook of personality: Theory and research (2nd ed.)* (2nd ed. ed., pp. 102-138, Chapter xiii, 738 Pages) Guilford Press, New York, NY.
- Lam, S., et al (2014). Understanding and measuring student engagement in school: The results of an international study from 12 countries. *School Psychology Quarterly, 29*(2), 213-232.
- Lang, F. R., & Carstensen, L. L. (1994). Close emotional relationships in late life: Further support for proactive aging in the social domain. *Psychology and Aging, 9*(2), 315-324.
- Ryff, C. D., & Keyes, C. L. M. (1995). The structure of psychological well-being revisited. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 69*(4), 719-727.
- Watson, D., & Clark, L.A. (1994). Emotions, moods, traits, and temperaments: Conceptual distinctions and empirical findings. In P. Ekman & R.J. Davidson (Eds.), *The nature of emotion: Fundamental questions* (pp. 89-93). New York: Oxford University Press.

Results

Personality Measures (Range)	Wave 1 Mean (SD): Min-Max	
Future Time Perspective (1 - 7)	5.67 (.83): 4.33 – 7.00	
Implicit Self Theory (1 - 7)	3.13 (.63): 2.20 – 4.00	
Environmental Mastery (1 - 5)	3.49 (.81): 2.33 – 4.67	
Personal Growth (1 - 5)	4.51 (.67): 2.33 – 5.00	
Trait Neuroticism (1 - 5)	3.37 (.76): 2.00 - 4.75	
Trait Conscientiousness (1 - 5)	3.6 (.45): 3.00 - 4.56	
Trait Openness (1 - 5)	3.63 (.57): 2.40 - 2.80	
Situation Measures and Engagement (Range)	Wave 2 Mean (SD): Min-Max	Wave 3 Mean (SD): Min-Max
Positive Emotions (7 - 35)	19.71 (4.88): 12.00 - 28.00	19.93 (5.92): 9.00 - 34.00
Negative Emotions (5 - 25)	12.18 (4.11): 5.00 - 19.00	11.6 (3.64): 5.00 - 19.00
Perceived Stress (1 - 5)	2.96 (.94): 1.25 - 4.75	2.92 (.75): 1.00 - 4.25
Relatedness Needs (1 - 5)	4.08 (.63): 3.00 - 5.00	4.27 (.59): 2.67 - 5.00
Instructor Enthusiasm (1 - 5)	4.73 (.43): 4.00 - 5.00	4.73 (.43): 4.00 - 5.00
Instructor Care (1 - 5)	4.76 (.44): 4.00 - 5.00	4.67 (.68): 3.00 - 5.00
Course Engagement (9 - 45)	33.06 (4.67): 23.00 - 41.00	33.2 (5.10): 17.00 - 40.00

Select Correlational Analyses

- Personal Growth was positively related to wave 2 engagement ($r=.56, p < .05$), wave 3 engagement ($r=.73, p < .01$), and residualized change in engagement ($r=.49, p < .05$).
- Wave 3 instructor enthusiasm was positively related to wave 3 engagement ($r=.62, p < .01$).

Discussion

- Student self-reports indicate high and relatively consistent levels of engagement.
- Personal growth appears especially important personality for overall engagement.
- Instructor enthusiasm may be important for engagement near the end of the semester.
- However, shifting features of life context (life stressors and variability in emotionality) were largely not statistically associated with engagement.
- Narrative data indicate that engagement is enhanced when course materials have “real world” relevance or map on to students’ “real lives”.
- Future classes should continue to focus on applicability of information and help students develop growth goals.