A Summary of the Research Status of Learning Engagement at Home and Abroad

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Abstract. As a good way to assess students’ learning effect, students’ learning engagement has been popular among scholars both home and abroad. In this paper, we summarized the researches from home and abroad and discussed students’ learning engagement from the aspect of its background, the connotation and structure of its concept as well as its measurement tools. Then we compared the empirical studies in China and abroad and found there were still some problems unsolved in the domestic studies such as: scholars failed to reach a consensus, no original Chinese measurement tools and few empirical studies on English major students. We also talked about the future trend of leaning engagement, hoping to make contribution for the further researches.

Background Knowledge

The quality of higher education has long been a topic attracting extensive attention especially after the prompt expansion of the scale of higher education, which undoubtedly contributes to the great engagement of universities around the world. On the one hand, universities at all levels are busy exploring new ways of teaching, hoping to improve their teaching quality and compete for excellent students. Nonetheless, on the other hand, students tend to be less engaged in class and school work. The rate of students’ cutting class has been constantly rising in recent years. As a result, a lot of problems concerning the quality of higher education has arisen all over the world, causing numerous scholars’ attention. Owing to this, many scholars’ attention has switched from the teachers’ teaching engagement to students’ learning engagement.

From 1980s, some western countries have begun to focus on the study efficiency and development of university students and their learning engagement. Afterwards, this kind of focus has been spreading all over the world from the west to east. In the recent 20 years, students’ learning engagement has become a popular issue attracting great attention from the scholars all around the world. [1] Students’ learning engagement, which serves as a good way for the study of students’ learning achievement as well as personal development, was first proposed by professor George Kuhn at Indiana University. Concurrently, with the promotion of National Survey of Student Engagement, short for NSSE in The United States, Canada, Australia and other countries, a growing number of scholars have been focusing on this issue.

In the last two decades, learning engagement has been a hot issue where many domestic scholars’ interests lie. National Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020) states: The cultivation of qualified graduates is the most basic requirement of national education. Reading through the outlines, we learn that it is students, rather than teachers, who should be the main part of education. To fully arouse students’ interests in learning and promote self-directed learning, teachers, as another teaching subject, are supposed to transform the way of teacher-centered teaching into students-centered and thus play the role of leading and directing. Apart from this, students’ all-around development as well as their ability to adapt to the fierce market competition should be the purpose of university education. In terms of the evaluation method, the traditional assessment of university resources has been replaced with the assessment of students’ learning engagement which has been a
new trend in the field of the assessment in higher education development. [2]

Raised by educational psychologist Ralph Tyler, The concept of learning engagement first emerged in 70 years ago. [3] In 1930s, Tyler did a research in Ohio and the University of Chicago to investigate the time students spend on homework and their effort in learning. In 1960s, Robert Pace began to pay his attention to students’ learning effect on the basis of which he developed the questionnaire of CSEQ and then in 1979, it was then put into use. In the 1980s, Alexander Astin did a research on “study participation”, which, from the perspective of many scholars, has been the research on students’ learning engagement in a real sense. As for the distinction and definition of these two concepts, namely, “study participation” and “learning engagement”, both Astin and kuh hold the idea that there is no substantial difference between them.

Concept of Learning Engagement

Currently, the studies of students’ learning engagement mainly fall into these three kinds: the concept, the measurement as well as some empirical studies of students’ learning engagement.

The study of concept contains two parts: the connotation of learning engagement and the structure of learning engagement.

Connotation of Learning Engagement

Students’ learning engagement, first known as mission time, was proposed by Tyler in the 1930s. Mission time signifies the time students engage in their study which is in accordance with how much they learn, the more they are engaged, the more they will learn. Tyler first brought the public’s attention to the time of students’ learning engagement and acted as the pioneer in the study of learning engagement. From then on, there has come a series of researches on students’ learning engagement. [4] Ericson combines students’ learning engagement with their course experience. In his opinion, students’ learning engagement can be demonstrated by the meaningful course experience they have got. Afterwards, Pace put forward the concept of “work quality” in which he held the opinion that it’s far from enough to only consider the time they spent on learning, besides this, the efficient time they contribute to study, namely, the concentration level in learning, which was called “learning quality” should also be taken into consideration. In 1992, another concept, psychological commitment and effort was raised by Newman, he pointed out that the factor of student’s psychology statement and their emotion should also be taken into consideration. He thought that students’ learning engagement should only include their time spent in schoolwork, what is more important is their psychological emotion and experience. [5] As for Skinner, Wellborn and Connell, they held the idea that students’ learning engagement should be defined as their behaviors, efforts as well as positive emotions in school life.” For the domestic scholars, they think students’ learning engagement include students’ time, money, and energy devoted to learning.

Structure of Learning Engagement

Owing to its popularity in recent years, a batch of scholars began to do research on students’ learning engagement. In addition to the connotation, the structure of learning engagement also takes up a great proportion. There are mainly two kinds of views on this: one is to divide it into energy, dedication, and focus while in the other view, it is divided into behavior engagement, emotion engagement and cognition engagement.

According to Schaufeli, the structure of learning engagement includes: energy, dedication, and focused which mainly came from his study on work. The concept of learning engagement originated from work lassitude whose opposite side was defined as work engagement by psychologists which was gradually applied in the field and thus, the concept of learning engagement occurred. In Schaufeli’s opinion, energy means to stay positive and energetic no matter what happened or how bad the working environment is. Dedication signifies strong sense of responsibility, sense of pride, enthusiasm and the courage to face any kind of challenge. Focus refers to full concentration and one
hundred percent commitment to study. Instead of treating study as burden, they consider it as kind of enjoyment.

There are also a great deal of scholars who defines learning engagement from another perspective, namely, behavior engagement, emotion engagement and cognition engagement one of whom is Frederick. Among them, Skinner, Guthrie and Connell mainly focuses on emotional engagement. Anderson, Pintrich and Newman paid attention to cognition engagement. [6] Finn, Cornell and Max studied behavior engagement.

According to Skinner and Connell, students’ emotion engagement mainly refers to their reaction to class, such as, the feeling of interesting, boring, joyful, sad, and anxious. [7] While, for Finn, he holds the idea that emotion engagement should be treated as a sense of belonging and identity. [8] There are still other scholars regarding emotional engagement as attitude influencing students’ will to study.

In regards to behavior engagement, scholars around the world divides them into three kinds: performance in class, attitude towards their study and active participation of all kinds of activities in school.

In terms of cognition engagement, there mainly exist two kinds of views: students’ psychological investment towards study and the strategy they use in the process of study. Newman defines cognition engagement as psychological investment of acquiring, understanding and mastering knowledge. Other scholars hold that cognition engagement refers to the usage of cognition strategic in learning.

Research Status of Measurement Tools

There are many tools for the measurement of students’ learning engagement among which the two most commonly used ones are Schaufeli’s Utrecht Work Engagements Scale-Student (UWES-S) and “National Survey of Students Engagement” (NSSE).

UWES-S, originally used in the field of work, mainly studies students’ learning engagement from the psychological perspective. But in actual use, we know that work is completely different from study, therefore, it is not appropriate to use it directly into study. On the other hand, owing to the differences in condition and culture, it is unreasonable to directly translate into Chinese without revision. Since there was no native scale for the measurement of student’ learning engagement, what we have to do is bringing in the western one and then revising it. Fang laitan introduced UWES-S to China and made a revision on it. [9] Li xiying made a revision on UWES-S and divided it into three dimension: vigor, devotion and focus.[10]

Apart from UWES-S, there is another measurement tool that arises more attention, which is called NSSE. With great validity and reliability, NSSE was first put forward by Pew Charitable Trusts in December in 1999. This measurement tool was used to measure the learning engagement of American undergraduates at the beginning. From the year 2000, this tool has begun to be widely used in many universities in America, and afterwards, it got into fame in many other countries all over the world, including Canada, Australia, Spain and so on.

There are together five indicators for NSSE: 1. LAC (level of academic challenge): college students’ study mission should be creative and challenging in that it plays a crucial role in the development of students’ cognition. Therefore, it is the duty of college teachers to improve the standard and requirement of their courses through which, students’ motivation for study can be stimulated. 2. ACL (active and collaborative learning): This contains two dimensions: being active, which means that students can learn actively and spontaneously instead of being pushed by their teachers. Corporation refers to students’ initiative collaboration and discussion with their peers. 3. SFL (student – faculty interaction) Active student-faculty interaction refers to students’ willingness to corporate with their teachers and timely feedback of what their teachers has taught them. 4. EEE (enriching educational experiences) Apart from students’ own effort, universities are also supposed to provide supporting resources for students. Enriching educational experiences refers to the learning environment as well as rich resources universities offer to their students including experiment equipment and multiple learning experience. 5. SCE (supportive campus environment) The
acceptance and support from school also play an essential role in students’ development. Supportive campus mainly refers to some kinds of system, policy, service and activities students get from universities.

In spite of its popularity across the world, to be fully applied to China, we still need to testify its validity and reliability. Accordingly, in 2008, Chinese scholar, Luoyan introduced NSSE and made it suitable for Chinese students. In 2008 and 2009 respectively, she sampled from undergraduates in Tsinghua University and compared them with some international top universities. After a series of survey and tests, NSSE was proved to be both effective and reliable. [11]

Empirical Study of Students’ Learning Engagement

With the widespread of the concept of learning engagement as well as accomplishment of learning engagement scale, Scholars both home and abroad began to apply it to the survey of students’ learning engagement status. They studied students’ learning engagement from a variety of perspectives: Gongshaoying in Central China Normal University tried to make clear what kind of effects students’ learning motivation had on their learning engagement. [12] Mazhiqiang applied learning engagement theory to study students’ internet behavior. [13] Wangweiyi focused on the relationship between students’ family cultural capital and their learning engagement.[14] Zhouyun paid attention to how gender factors influenced students’ learning engagement.[15] Wenwen(2009) made a survey on nine key university students to have a further understanding of self-enrollment students and give suggestions to them.[16] Wang Shu(2010) adopted “the survey data of Chinese college Students’ Performance” and constructed structural equation model to discuss the influences of students’ learning engagement on their performance. Some foreign studied mainly included Peter T. Ewell’s introduction of NSSE, Steven M. LaNas’ validity test of five dimensions of NSSE and Adams’ three new scales of learning engagement.

Summary

From the above literature, we can see there are so many scholars who have been devoting to the researches of students’ learning engagement that it has been developing rapidly in the recent years. On one hand, we have made multiple progress and achieved great accomplishments while on the other hand, we have to admit that there still exist numerous unsolved problems: 1. As for the specific connotation of student’ learning engagement, scholars failed to reach a consensus. Consequently, a unified understanding and definition can be the future direction for the successive scholars in the field of learning engagement. 2. Furthermore, the two measurement tools of learning engagement are both introduced from abroad, in spite of the revision work scholars have done, there are still some culture shocks which lead to a variety of problems while using, accordingly, the design of our own measurement tools with great validity and reliability has also been a great challenge for us. 3. In empirical researches, there are few researches on the learning engagement of English major undergraduates. English, a common and compulsory course for all undergraduates, is especially of great importance for students of English majors. Consequently, it is essential to know about their situation of learning engagement.

Through the analysis of literature home and abroad, we can see many scholars abroad have tried to make clear the relationship between students’ learning engagement and its effect on learning through by taking learning engagement as a variate. However, there are few researches of this kind appearing in China in the recent years. As a result, for the future researches, this is trend to focus on the relations between learning engagement and its influence on study.
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