Orientations to Studying

Chapters 2 and 3 were concerned with approaches to studying and conceptions of learning, respectively. These constructs are mainly concerned with the cognitive or intellectual aspects of studying in higher education. However, academic progress and attainment may depend at least as much upon the motivational aspects of learning. The concept of a study orientation was introduced to cover both the cognitive and the motivational aspects of how students approach the business of learning in higher education: this chapter traces the development of this concept in research into both campus-based and distance education.

In Chapter 1, I pointed out that students in distance education were physically and socially separated both from their teachers and from their institutions. In fact, they are often isolated not only from their teachers but from other students as well (Kahl and Cropley 1986). It has been suggested that this isolation might have negative consequences for the development of generic skills such as critical thinking (Anderson and Garrison 1995). Pugliese (1996) referred to ‘the loneliness of the long distance learner’, but the evidence he presented indicates that loneliness per se is not related either to the likelihood of course completion or to academic performance in those students who do complete their courses (see also Pugliese 1994).

Even so, it is clear that students taking courses in distance education may often lack immediate social support in their learning from both their teachers and their fellow students. Consequently, motivational aspects of learning may be more important than the intellectual aspects of learning in the context of distance education, and it is certainly true that student motivation has been a particular concern for researchers into distance education. As in previous chapters, however, I will discuss the development of research on orientations to studying in campus-based education before turning to the findings of research into orientations to studying in distance education.
Orientations to studying in campus-based education

In Chapter 2, I described an investigation by Laurillard (1978, 1979, 1984), who interviewed 31 students of science and engineering at a campus-based university about how they were tackling the coursework problems that they had encountered on different courses. Laurillard noted that her participants often referred to their interests and their aims in their courses of study, but she considered that 'motivation' and 'attitude' were not appropriate terms to describe these aspects of their studying. Instead, their comments seemed to reveal the nature of the factors that the students took into account in deciding upon the use of different methods of studying, and these Laurillard characterized as their 'orientation'. She concluded:

A student's overall orientation to his course influences the nature of his response to the requirements of the task which, together with his perception of what these are, determines his approach to the learning task. This in turn, together with the teaching and nature of the learning task, influences the student's learning style.

(Laurillard 1978: 170)

Laurillard identified three different types of orientation to studying according to the transcripts of the interviews: "academic" (interested in the subject), "vocational" (interested in career opportunity), and "social" (interested in general self-education). Nevertheless, she emphasized that the students whom she had interviewed

seldom ascribed to themselves a single overall orientation, although usually one would appear to have greater priority than the others. The different types of orientation should not therefore be seen as dividing students into groups. Each student seemed to be aware of having all three types, but to varying degrees.

(Laurillard 1978: 172)

Laurillard suggested that these orientations were linked to methods of studying through motivational factors. She suggested that students with an academic orientation had an 'intrinsic' motivation based upon an interest in the subject for its own sake, but that students with a vocational orientation had an 'extrinsic' motivation based upon an interest in obtaining qualifications. A social orientation had little bearing upon the study method adopted, except in so far as students with this orientation did less work overall than the students who were academically or vocationally orientated to their studies (Laurillard 1978: 174).

Taylor (1983) carried out a more detailed investigation of students' orientations towards their courses at the same campus-based institution of higher education (see also Taylor et al. 1980, 1981c). She defined an
'orientation' as 'all those attitudes and aims that express the student's individual relationship with a course and the university' (Taylor et al. 1981c: 3; Taylor 1983: 130). On the basis of structured interviews with 39 students on two different degree courses, Taylor identified four principal types of study orientation: vocational, academic, personal and social. However, these could be expressed in terms of either an intrinsic or an extrinsic interest in their degree course itself. Box 4.1 illustrates how these different orientations were linked to the different concerns expressed by the students while they were studying their courses.

Taylor argued that students' orientations constituted their personal context for studying, and that the latter was a primary determinant of how they subsequently approached their academic studies. She initially interviewed her students towards the end of either their first or second year of study and then annually for 2 years thereafter. She found that some students tackled their studies in a way that accommodated both their orientations and the demands of their courses. However, some students had to adapt their orientations to suit the demands of their courses, while other students failed to achieve such a compromise and left the university altogether. Taylor concluded that students' study patterns resulted from a complex negotiation between their orientations to studying and their perceptions of the situational context.
Orientations to studying in distance education

Goodyear (1976) carried out a group interview to explore the motives of a sample of students who were about to embark on courses by distance learning with the Open University in the UK. She identified two basic motives:

- obtaining a specific qualification to achieve some promotion in one's job
- searching for something to compensate for perceived inadequacies or dissatisfaction in one's current life.

The latter motive might amount to making up for missed opportunity in one's past experience, escaping from everyday routine in one's current situation or investing in one's future. Goodyear also interviewed some students who were currently taking courses at the Open University and other students who had failed to complete their courses. Many claimed that their motivation had changed during their studies, but Goodyear did not analyse their comments in any depth.

In Chapters 2 and 3, I mentioned the longitudinal study conducted by the Study Methods Group at the Open University in the UK. The first set of interviews in this investigation was carried out with 29 students who were about to embark on their first year of study with the Open University by taking the Social Science Foundation Course. On examining the interview transcripts, Taylor et al. (1980) found evidence for all of the different study orientations that Taylor had identified at the campus-based university (see Box 4.1), except that none of the distance-learning students appeared to exhibit a social orientation to studying (see also Taylor et al. 1981c). Presumably, aspiring students with a strong social orientation simply choose not to study by means of distance learning. Even so, Gibbs et al. (1984) pointed out that some students taking courses with the Open University placed a high priority upon their tutorials because these did provide a limited opportunity to meet other people.

As I mentioned in Chapter 2, 18 of these students were interviewed at the end of the year, when they were asked, among other things, what they felt they had gained from studying the course in question. Taylor et al. (1983) found evidence of an association between their study orientations at the start of the course and their perceptions of what they had gained at the end of the course (see also Morgan et al. 1983):

Where there had been a wish for personal development at the start of the course, in the interview at the end of the course there appeared to be a corresponding emphasis on personal gains. Similarly, where initially students had expressed a wish to follow up an interest in particular subjects, either for academic or vocational reasons, they tended to emphasize their increased understanding of those subjects in the later interview.

(Taylor et al. 1983: 143)
However, this association was more apparent where the original orientation had been intrinsic in nature; where the orientation had been extrinsic, the outcome of the course was presumably seen merely as a means to a further end and was therefore not mentioned as an actual gain.

In Chapter 3, I also mentioned an investigation by Vermunt and van Rijswijk (1988) in which interviews were carried out with students who had recently embarked on courses with the Dutch Open University. In analysing their interview transcripts, Vermunt and van Rijswijk compared their own participants’ accounts with the descriptions of orientations to studying that had been provided in the publications of the Study Methods Group (see, for example, Gibbs et al. 1984). They remarked in passing that their interviews with distance-learning students had resulted in descriptions of orientations to studying that were ‘comparable to those of Gibbs et al.’, and this would indicate that the scheme shown in Box 4.1 has a fairly high degree of generality.

Marland et al. (1984) carried out a small-scale study in which four people who were registered as external students at an Australian university were video recorded while they were studying genuine course materials. The participants then watched a replay of themselves carrying out the task and attempted to recall their thought processes during the task. Their accounts suggested that just two basic types of study orientation encompassed their motivations, study strategies, role perceptions and levels of processing while carrying out the task. One of these involved intrinsic motivation, optimizing strategies, a divergent role and deep processing. The other orientation involved extrinsic motivation, satisficing strategies (that is, fulfilling the minimum requirements to achieve a particular goal), a compliant role and surface processing.

Clearly, the value of this study is limited by the very small number of participants. However, in a subsequent investigation using the same methodology, Marland et al. (1990, 1992) classified 17 students who were taking courses by distance learning as having either a ‘surface’ approach or a ‘deep’ approach with regard to their motivations, their strategies and their conceptions of learning. Thirteen of the students were classified consistently across all three domains, and only four combined indicators of both a surface approach and a deep approach. However, even those students who had espoused a deep approach towards studying seemed to engage with the course materials in a rapid and superficial manner. Marland et al. argued that the latter finding was a matter for some concern. Nevertheless, it might simply have reflected the participants’ response to the perceived demands of what seems to have been a singularly unrealistic experimental task.

Olgren (1993, 1996) interviewed 20 distance-learning students at an institution in the US about how they had actually been studying one module on marketing. She found that their accounts could be categorized as representing three different ‘approaches’ – reproducing, comprehension and application – that varied in terms of:
the learner's goal orientation;
- the learner's perceptions of the value of the task, the demands of the examination and the outcome of learning; and
- the learner's knowledge about effective learning strategies.

Although Olgren's students typically had multiple goals that were vocational, academic and personal in nature, these goals tended to be consistently orientated towards either intrinsic or extrinsic concerns in the manner that was described by Taylor et al. (1981c). Olgren concluded that the outcome of distance learning depended not only on the learners' cognitive strategies but also on their perceptions, their goals and other possible factors that affected their mental involvement and their self-direction in learning.

Campus-based versus distance education

As in Laurillard's (1978) earlier study, the orientations shown in Box 4.1 were not intended to be seen as mutually exclusive. Instead, they represented idealized extremes that might well be combined in any particular student's orientation (see Taylor et al. 1980, 1981c). An academic orientation or a vocational orientation was the major component for most of the campus-based students interviewed by Taylor (1983), whereas signs of a personal orientation were shown by all the students who were embarking on distance-learning courses at the Open University. An analogous pattern was obtained by Saga (1992) in a postal survey of distance-learning students in Pakistan. However, von Prümmer (1990) found that distance-learning students in the former West Germany endorsed vocational and personal motives to roughly the same extent.

Presumably, extrinsic vocational motives are more important than intrinsic academic motives when the course is being taken as a prerequisite for a degree that leads to a particular career. Yellen (1998) obtained replies to a postal survey from 36 students who were taking courses in information systems with four different distance-learning institutions in the US. He also obtained responses from 123 students who completed the same questionnaire in class time while taking comparable courses in a campus-based institution. Yellen found no difference in the extent to which these two groups rated their motivation for taking their course 'to learn the material' rather than 'to get a degree'. In this context, the motivation for both distance-learning and campus-based students was primarily extrinsic rather than intrinsic in nature.

In addition, Taylor (1983) had found a personal orientation in some of the students whom she had interviewed at the campus-based university. Taylor et al. (1981c) observed that nearly all the students in question were 'mature' students: that is, they had been over the age of 26 years at the time of their admission to the university. (These students are often referred to as 'adult' students in the US and as 'mature-age' students in Australia, although the age limit used to define such students varies from one institution to
another and has changed over time.) In both respects, they were more like
distance-learning students than the majority of campus-based students. (As
I mentioned in Chapter 3, the average age of Open University students is
about 40 years.) As Taylor et al. themselves suggested: ‘It may be that per-
sonal orientation is a feature of mature students rather than just Open
University students’ (Taylor et al. 1981c: 10).

Indeed, a survey of students in the final year of a psychology degree at
another campus-based university in the UK indicated that older students
may well have personal goals that are not shared by younger students
(Marshall and Nicolson 1991). When asked why they had chosen to study
psychology, ten out of 15 ‘mature’ students (in this case, those who had
been over the age of 25 years at the time of their admission to the course)
indicated that they had chosen to study psychology to make more of their
own lives by opening up professional and intellectual opportunities and
also by enhancing their self-confidence. As one stated:

‘I came through school without any qualifications at all. I wasn’t par-
ticularly encouraged to believe in myself . . . Then through events in my
own life I realised that I had more potential than I’d ever given myself
credit for and I didn’t know what it was – but I was going to find out!’

(Marshall and Nicolson 1991: 27)

However, not one of the 24 younger students who were included in this
survey gave answers of this sort. This implies that there are no inher-
ent differences in the orientations of campus-based students and distance-
learning students once the difference in their ages is taken into account.

Earlier in this chapter, I referred to an investigation by Vermunt and van
Rijswijk (1988) that had involved 34 first-year students who had recently
embarked on four different courses with the Dutch Open University.
Although Vermunt and van Rijswijk indicated the broad rationale for
their research, they did not present any detailed analysis of their qualitative
data. The latter was provided in a subsequent paper by Vermunt (1996),
which also presented comparable data from 11 first-year students who were
studying psychology at a campus-based university in the Netherlands. The
account that follows is, therefore, based on information contained in both
of these publications.

Vermunt and van Rijswijk began by arguing that one important dimen-
sion underlying student learning was the extent to which educational tasks
and activities were regulated by students themselves rather than by their
teachers. It would therefore be important to determine not only the differ-
ent ways in which their students went about learning specific materials, but
also the different ways in which they or their teachers tried to coordinate
the learning of those materials. In looking for common themes in the
transcripts of their interviews, Vermunt and van Rijswijk identified two dif-
ferent kinds of activities — processing and regulation:

Processing activities are directed at elements of the learning content,
such as facts, concepts, definitions, arguments, conclusions, theories,
Box 4.2 Learning styles and their components

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Components</th>
<th>Undirected</th>
<th>Reproduction directed</th>
<th>Meaning directed</th>
<th>Application directed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive processing</td>
<td>Hardly any processing</td>
<td>Stepwise processing</td>
<td>Deep processing</td>
<td>Concrete processing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regulation of learning</td>
<td>Lack of regulation</td>
<td>Mostly external regulation</td>
<td>Mostly self-regulation</td>
<td>Both external and self-regulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective processes</td>
<td>Low self-esteem</td>
<td>Fear of forgetting</td>
<td>Intrinsic interest</td>
<td>Practical interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failure expectations</td>
<td>Cooperation and being stimulated</td>
<td>Intake of knowledge</td>
<td>Construction of knowledge</td>
<td>Use of knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental model of learning</td>
<td>Ambivalent</td>
<td>Certificate and self-test oriented</td>
<td>Person oriented</td>
<td>Vocation oriented</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Vermunt 1996: 47

perspectives, etc. Regulation activities are directed at the processing activities; students employ them to orchestrate, coordinate, regulate and check their own processing activities and so to exert control over their own learning.

(Vermunt and van Rijswijk 1988: 649)

In addition, whether and how students are able to regulate their own learning activities clearly depends upon their conceptions of learning and their motivation or orientation to their studies. Consequently, Vermunt and van Rijswijk looked for major themes under these headings, too. Although they identified variation among different students at each of these levels, this seemed to be subsumed under four overarching learning 'styles', which they described as 'undirected', 'reproduction directed', 'meaning directed' and 'application directed'. These differed in how the students processed the materials to be learned, in how they regulated their learning, in the affective processes that arose during their studying, in their conceptions – or, as Vermunt (1996) characterized them, their 'mental models' – of learning and in their learning orientations. The characteristics of the four learning styles are summarized in Box 4.2.
These were prototypical styles or idealized extremes that once again could be combined in any particular student. However, in fact every respondent showed a single dominant style. Vermunt did not report how frequently the four different styles were identified within each of the groups of students (that is, campus-based versus distance-learning). This would not in itself have been very informative for two reasons:

1. The relative frequency of each learning style probably varies from one discipline to another, and yet the two groups were studying different academic disciplines.
2. The relative frequency of each learning style probably varies with age, and yet the two groups differed in their mean ages (distance-learning students, 33.0 years; campus-based students, 22.4 years).

Nevertheless, the illustrative extracts from the interviews that Vermunt included in his article implied that all four learning styles had been exhibited by both distance-learning students and campus-based students. This implies that the two groups were essentially comparable in their learning activities, in their conceptions or mental models of learning, and in their basic orientations towards studying in higher education.

Concluding summary

• Students at campus-based institutions of higher education in the Netherlands and the UK display a limited number of orientations to studying that are characterized by the scheme originally presented by Taylor (1983). These reflect their motivation for engaging in higher education and are a primary determinant of how they approach their academic studies.
• Similar orientations to studying have been identified in students taking courses by distance education at 'open universities' in Germany, the Netherlands, Pakistan and the UK and in students taking courses as 'external' students at universities in Australia and the US.
• Distance-learning and campus-based students seem to be comparable in their orientations to studying. The chief exception is that students taking courses by distance learning tend not to show a social orientation to studying. This is hardly surprising, given the physical separation from teachers and other students that is inherent in distance education.
• Students taking courses by distance learning are instead likely to show a personal orientation to studying. In this respect, they resemble older campus-based students and differ from younger campus-based students. To the extent that a personal orientation is more common in distance-learning students than campus-based students, this is probably due to differences in their ages rather than to differences in the mode of course delivery.