



Agency of University Students (AUS): a research method and tool for the development of pedagogy and learning environment

PedaForum 17.-18.8.2016

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eEducation – a multidisciplinary network project



Content of the presentation

- What is studied and why?
- The concept of agency in higher education context
- A developed measurement tool: The Agency of University Student (AUS) Scale
- Preliminary results
- Learning environment in our study: Working on items to be included in the AUS Scale
- Further plans: Interventions, utility of the scale, further research



Co-authors, contributors and partners

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- University teachers and lectures from different discipline at the University of Jyväskylä
- University of the Balearic Islands, Spain



Research intrests and questions

- University students' agency, university courses as learning environments, technology in support of learning
- How do university students perceive their agency under a variety of learning formats in university courses?
 - Trying to capture “the course profile” concerning pedagogical and technological solutions related to strong agency experiences
 - Students' views and experiences of their own agency, and of the learning environment of the course



Why agency?

- A core component of professionalism
- The meaning of agency is emphasised in expert work which demands creativity, collaboration and dynamism.
- A key role in lifelong learning and in coping with uncertainty and changes in work life.
- Universities typically focus on content-based knowledge construction of individual learners. How do they prepare students for engaging purposively with the complex world and dealing with pressures of power relations and external influences?
- The need exists for developing both research tools for better recognizing the phenomenon and pedagogical practices that support agency construction.

AGENCY IN HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT

Coping with life

Change

Creativity

Professional identity

EXPERTISE

Knowledge, experience & self-regulation

Shared expertise

Collaborative problem solving

Influencing

Networks

Active

CITIZENSHIP

INDIVIDUAL in
social environment

*Lifelong
learning*

Identity as learner

1. Professional agency

2. Participative and communal agency

3. Individual agency

AGENCY:

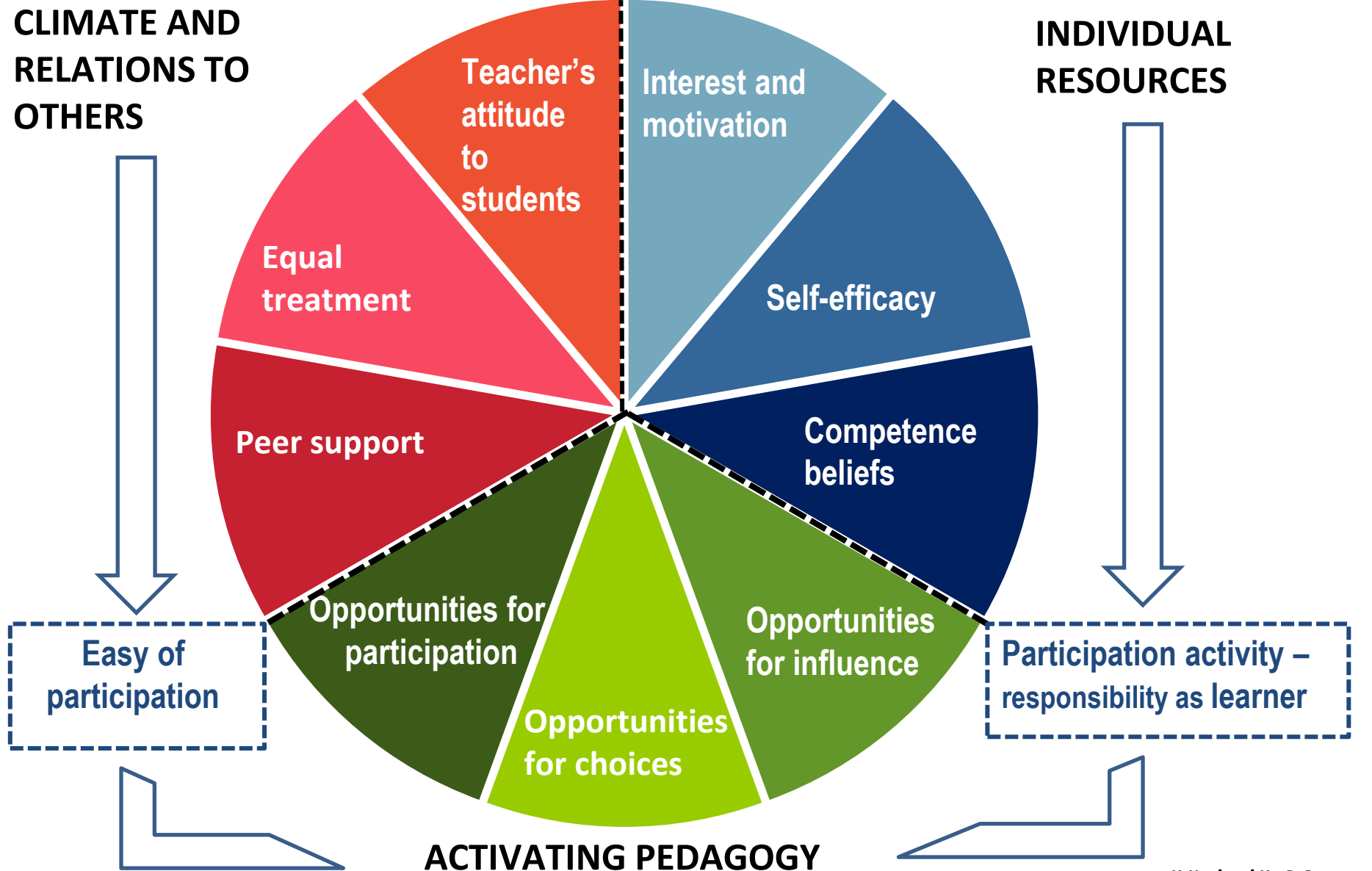
**"Access to (and use of)
the resources for
purposeful action
in study context"**



Agency in higher education context

- Access to (and use of) resources for purposeful action in study contexts (Jääskelä et al. 2016)
- Individual, relational and contextual resources
- We are interested in students' perceptions of these resources
- Rather than a stable state agency is conceived as dynamic and contextual in nature (c.f., Emirbayer and Mische 1998)

DIMENSIONS OF AGENCY



Agency of University Student (AUS) Scale: 10 FACTORS

Individual resources

- Interest and motivation ($\alpha = .87$)
- Self-efficacy ($\alpha = .87$)
- Competence beliefs ($\alpha = .87$)
- Participation activity (activity and easy of participation) ($\alpha = .91$)

- ▣ 54 claims (5 point Likert-scale; from 1 = fully disagree to 5 = fully agree)
- ▣ An open question about constraints in learning in the course

Social resources

- Equal treatment ($\alpha = .74$)
- Teacher support ($\alpha = .80$)
- Peer support ($\alpha = .77$)
- Trust ($\alpha = .84$)

Contextual resources

- Opportunities for influence ($\alpha = .76$)
- Opportunities for choices ($\alpha = .78$)

Interest and motivation

This course did not particularly motivate or inspire me.

The most interesting feature of the course was its contents.

Teacher support

The teachers' attitude towards students in the course was friendly.

Self-efficacy

I believe I will succeed in the more challenging tasks in the course.

EXAMPLES OF THE ITEMS IN THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Competence beliefs

I have understood the concepts presented in the course.

... found the course contents as too difficult.

Participation activity

I was active in making comments and asking questions in this course.

Easy of participation

It has been possible for me to express my thoughts and views without being afraid of ridicule.

Opportunities for choices

I have not had the possibility to choose ways in which to complete the course.

Opportunities for influence

I feel I have been able to influence the working methods of this course (e.g. whether group work or lectures).

Trust

I feel that I can trust the course teachers.

It is easy to approach the course teachers.

EXAMPLES OF THE ITEMS IN THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Equal treatment

I feel that I have had an equal position with the other students in this course.

Peer support

I experienced other students as a resource for learning on this course.



Findings related to agency (n=239)

- Various domains of agency are intertwined (correlations between the factors were mostly high).
- Experiences of trust in learning situations seem to play a strong facilitating role in relation to agency because particularly high correlations emerged between the factor of trust and most of the other factors.
- Students in the final stage of their studies (over 180 credits) reported their highest participation activity and opportunities to influence than the other students.
- Students in the middle stage of their studies experienced lower opportunities to make choices compared to both students at the beginning and advanced stages of their studies.
- Older students reported higher peer support than their younger counterparts.
- Female students reported higher levels of interest and motivation than male students.

Can students' strong agency experiences be promoted by university pedagogy?

- Findings based on the few sub-studies (2011-2015): students' ratings of agency were higher among students who attended the interactively implemented than among students of the comparison course.
- This finding needs to be interpreted with caution because classification of the courses was based on the written course descriptions by the teachers.
- More precisely knowledge about the courses as a learning environments is needed.

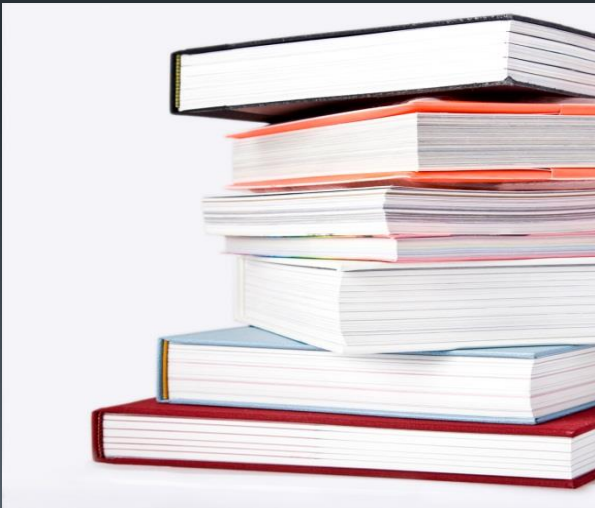
Viewpoints of the learning environment in the questionnaire

- Flexibility:
 - Time frames for studying
 - Place for teaching and guidance
 - Use of technology
- Student-centredness:
 - The roles of teacher and students (aims/contents/working methods/assessment)
- Working methods:
 - One-way – participative – functional/experimental methods
- Elements of learning – technology as a support of learning:
 - To what extent does the course include certain elements of learning? – To what extent do technological solutions used in the course support (are experienced as meaningful) that kind of learning?

The elements of learning

The learning theoretical principles (Häkkinen, Hakarainen, Järvelä) e.g.

- Active knowledge construction
- Meaningfulness and authenticity in learning
- Social nature of learning



To what extent the course includes:

Defining one's own learning needs and learning goals

Meaningful, motivating learning experiences

Critical assessment of knowledge

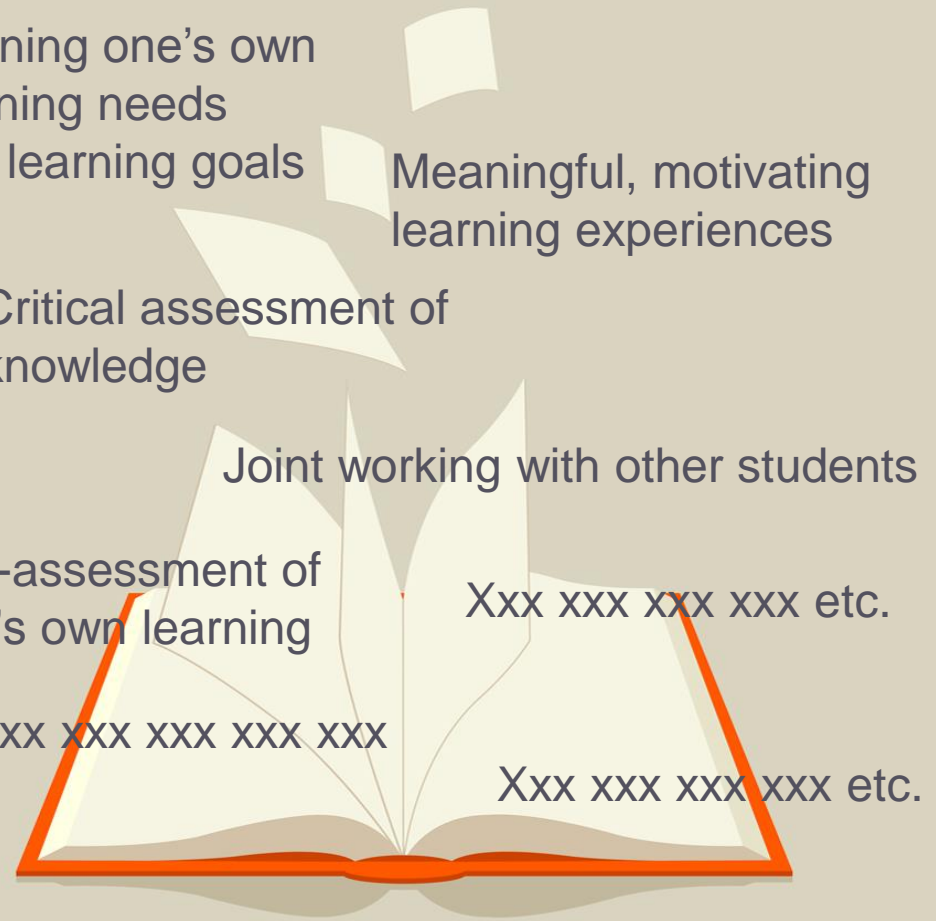
Joint working with other students

Self-assessment of one's own learning

Xxx xxx xxx xxx etc.

Xxx xxx xxx xxx xxx

Xxx xxx xxx xxx etc.





Further plans

- Utility of the AUS Scale as tool for the pedagogical development
 - Summaries of the results are now offered as a support service for the teachers attending to the university's teaching developmental project
- Pedagogical interventions in terms of fostering agency; workshops for sharing ideas among teachers and students of different disciplines could be useful
- Following-up students' agency experiences during university studies → First co-operation plans with the Department of Languages, University of Jyväskylä
- Comparing students' agency experiences in various countries → Finland and Spain

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