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What Role Do Teaching Practices Play in Student Success in the First Year of University?

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This article features results from a research project aimed at examining the role of self-reported teaching practices in academic success in the first year of university.

For further details, please consult: Jacquemart, J., De Clercq, M. et Galand, B. (2024). [The black box revelation of instructional practices: a mixed study of the transition to HE](#). *European Journal of Higher Education*, 1-22.

Background

The Role of the Learning Environment: The Blind Spot in Knowledge About the Student Success Process

Entering higher education is a complex stage for students (Trautwein & Bosse, 2017). They can experience many failures or elect to drop out (Heublein, 2014). This first year is therefore a pivotal moment in their academic pathway, where particular attention is paid to their success process (Van Rooij & al., 2018).

At least three categories of factors can explain success in higher education (Richardson & al., 2012; Schneider & Preckel, 2017):

- 1 Student characteristics:** gender, socio-economic status, high school grades, etc.
- 2 Psychosocial factors:** engagement, emotions, belief in personal efficacy, etc.
- 3 The learning environment:** pedagogical tools, course characteristics and teaching practices, etc.

While the majority of research focuses on the first two categories of factors, the role of the learning environment, and particularly of teachers, in success in higher education is less studied (Van Rooij & al., 2018; Dupont & al., 2015). We have filled this gap by analyzing in detail the role of teaching practices in success. Our study also provides avenues for action to better support student success from the first year of university studies.

Key Concept

What are Teaching Practices?

Teaching practices consist of all the actions implemented by teaching staff (consciously or unconsciously) in interaction (physical or virtual) with students as part of a course (Jacquemart & al., 2023).

There are four types of particularly relevant teaching practices:

Table 1.

Four Types of Teaching Practices



Socio-emotional support:
to foster a positive climate



Classroom management:
to make lessons productive
and motivate students






Pedagogical support:
to promote the understanding
of each learner



Cognitive activation:
to make students think deeply

Methodology

A mixed-method approach for the in-depth study of teaching practices

-  **Type of research:** mixed (quantitative and qualitative)
-  **Study population:** first-year students as well as teachers from different disciplines in five Belgian universities
-  **Place and period of research:** Online in 2017–2018 and 2018–2019

A questionnaire measured the practices reported by 18 teachers. Another questionnaire measured the background (gender, socioeconomic status, high school grades) of 932 first-year students as well as their psychosocial characteristics. The effect on success (measured by grades) at the end of the year was analyzed using multilevel analyses. Eight focus groups were used to gather the perceptions of 40 students on the role of teaching practices in their success during their first year.

Results

The important role of teaching practices in success in the first year of university

Teaching Practices Play a Role in Student Success.

The results of the quantitative analyses suggest that 27.5% of the variation in first-year students' grades is related to course context (e.g., classroom practices, audience size, pedagogical approach). Teaching practices could therefore act as a lever for academic success in the first year of university.

2

Three Dimensions of Teaching Practices are Associated with Success.

Analysis of the practices reported by teachers shows that **pedagogical support** ($\beta=.47$; $p<.01$) and **socio-emotional support** ($\beta=.36$; $p<.01$) are positively associated with success in the first year of university studies. Furthermore, the more teachers report fostering a positive climate and an understanding of the course, the higher the students' grades. On the other hand, too much focus on **classroom management** is negatively associated with student success ($\beta=-.22$; $p<.01$). Together, these practices explain 65.3% of the variation in student success from one course to another.

3

Students Identify Five Teaching Practices That Contribute to Their Success.

The focus groups provide insights into the teaching practices that students consider most contributive to their success in the first year.

¹ The “ β ” or beta coefficient represents the strength of the effect of one variable on another. It ranges from -1 to +1. The closer its value is to 1 or -1, the stronger the relationship between the two variables. “ p ” refers to the p-value. A p-value of less than 0.05 means that the relationship between two variables is significant.

Five practices likely to foster engagement, motivation and in-depth understanding of course content are reported by the participants:

Table 2.
Five Practices Likely to Foster Engagement, Motivation and In-Depth Understanding of Course Content

- Socio-emotional support
- Classroom management
- Pedagogical support



Teacher's attention to students;
 i.e., encouraging them,
 giving them positive feedback.



Attitudes in communication;
 i.e., being eloquent, charismatic.



An interactive and entertaining lesson;
 i.e., providing opportunities for interaction,
 offering exercises for practice.



Flexibility on the part of the teacher with regard to the flow of the lesson;
 i.e., taking time over a difficult notion,
 re-explaining in other words.



Clear and consistent expectations;
 i.e., proposing a course structure and
 tasks consistent with the assessment format.

What Can we Learn from our Results?

Three key lessons for teachers to support success in the first-year

1

Teachers should reinforce pedagogical and socio-emotional support to sustain success.

Pedagogical support can be strengthened with greater flexibility in the course structure, an effort for clarity in the lesson, clear identification of expectations or attention to students' comprehension difficulties.

Socio-emotional support is fostered by considering students' points of view, giving them choices in course activities, promoting a positive climate and avoiding social comparison among students.

2

Classroom management practices that are too rigid could be detrimental to student success.

Focusing mainly on making rapid progress in the subject and on strict compliance with instructions (namely silence) could limit opportunities for interaction between teaching staff and students, and make the classroom climate less supportive. This situation is believed in turn to result in fewer learning opportunities and to limit the regulation of comprehension difficulties.

3

The teacher's power to act is not limited to teaching practices.

The characteristics and organization of the course also have an effect on success beyond the practices adopted during the course. For example, students mentioned the importance of the pedagogical tools used by the teacher, such as lesson plans, interactive tools and slides. Therefore, it is worthwhile for teachers to work on both their classroom practices and the pedagogical tools they propose to students.

Courses of Action

For management teams

- ✓ Inform and raise awareness among teaching staff about the importance of teaching practices for student success.
- ✓ Provide training for teaching staff in order to improve practices that foster socio-emotional and pedagogical support.

For teachers

- ✓ Take care not to overemphasize course productivity to the detriment of differentiated student support.
- ✓ Reinforce the use of interactive activities to support learning.
- ✓ Be attentive to the attitudes in communication used to deliver the course.
- ✓ Design a pedagogically and emotionally supportive learning environment.

Lines of Research

- 🔍 Measure teaching practices through systematic observation to improve understanding of actual teaching practices, while avoiding the subjectivity and social desirability bias in teacher-reported measures.
- 🔍 Replicate this research by collecting data on teaching practices and psychosocial variables from the student population longitudinally.
- 🔍 Study the multivariate impact (rather than the direct impact) of teaching practices on the overall success process (e.g., considering student motivation and engagement as mediating variables).
- 🔍 Analyze more closely the specific dimensions of teaching practices in subsequent studies of university experience in the first year.
- 🔍 Further explore specific learning activities conducive to academic success.

For Further Reading

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Jacquemart, J., De Clercq, M. & Galand, B. (2024). Développement et validation d'un protocole d'observation des pratiques enseignantes dans l'enseignement supérieur. *Évaluer – Journal international de recherche en éducation et formation*, 10(3), 95-129.

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Biographical Notes



Mikaël De Clercq is a research expert at the Academy for Research and Higher Education (ARES) and a Visiting Professor at the Université catholique de Louvain in Belgium. His research focuses primarily on transitions in higher education. The first component of his research centres around the process of orientation and preparation for higher education. On this subject, he is coordinating the implementation of a national orientation support tool (ADA) requiring the collaboration of French-speaking Belgian universities. A second component looks at the role of the learning environment and teaching practices on success in higher education. This work has led to the validation of a tool for the systematic observation of teaching practices in the classroom (Just-Teach). A third component focuses on student diversity, inclusion and success in higher education. Thanks to his work, he was awarded the prix de la recherche en fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles. He is also involved in other areas of research, such as doctoral perseverance, teacher well-being and the ecological transition.

Biographical Notes



Justine Jacquemart is a doctoral student in psychology and educational sciences at the Université catholique de Louvain (UCLouvain, Belgium, FNRS funding). She is currently working under the supervision of Professors Benoît Galand and Mikaël De Clercq. Her research focuses on the observation of classroom teaching practices in higher education and the impact of teaching practices on students' academic success and engagement. Initial work on her thesis led to the design of Just-Teach, a tool for the systematic observation of teaching practices. With a master's degree in educational sciences (2021) and a cumulative bachelor's degree in secondary teaching and mathematics (2018), Justine taught mathematics in high school for three years, developing innovative pedagogical tools. Passionate about improving the quality of teaching, she collaborates with teachers and researchers to design research-based pedagogical tools, thereby contributing to the evolution of educational practices in higher education.

Biographical Notes



Benoît Galand holds a doctorate in psychology and is Professor of Educational Sciences at the Université catholique de Louvain (UCLouvain). He is a member of the Groupe Interdisciplinaire de Recherche sur la Socialisation, l'Éducation et la Formation (GIRSEF) and an associate member of the Groupe de Recherche sur les Environnements Scolaires (GRES – Canada). His research focuses on motivation (self-confidence, engagement, dropping out), socialization (sanctions, violence, harassment) and learning, from the primary level to higher education. He has experience as a secondary school teacher and a school board member. He is the author of numerous publications in international journals and scientific works, and a regular speaker and trainer with national and international bodies.



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