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WORKING PAPER

*Self-Regulated Learning and Its Influence on Student Motivation:
A Case Study from the UK*

Fredrik Nyman, PhD

Department of Psychology and Social Work

Senior Lecturer in Social Work

Mid Sweden University

SE-831 25 Östersund, Sweden

info@fredriknyman.se

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4710-4926>

Self-Regulated Learning and Its Influence on Student Motivation: A Case Study from the UK

Fredrik Nyman^{1*}

¹ Department of Psychology and Social Work,
Mid Sweden University, Östersund, Jämtland, Sweden

* info@fredriknyman.se

ABSTRACT

This article examines the learning approaches of students in higher education (HE) and offers valuable implications for educational practices in this context. The study delves into students' self-regulation and engagement with various learning sources, shedding light on how they organise their learning. The findings reveal several important insights. The study highlights that students primarily rely on lectures, literature, self-directed information-seeking, and peer interactions as key sources for acquiring knowledge. However, it is noteworthy that students tend to give limited attention to teaching techniques and their effectiveness. This emphasises the need to align teaching content with students' prior knowledge and understanding, while also recognising the significance of repetition and active engagement to deepen their comprehension. One significant barrier identified in the study is students' struggle with time management, which often impairs their ability to meet deadlines. To address this issue, teachers are encouraged to prioritise self-monitoring skills and provide explicit guidance on prerequisite knowledge and essential skills. By supporting students in developing effective time management strategies, educators can enhance their overall learning experience. Furthermore, fostering interest, motivation, and self-efficacy through meaningful learning experiences and nurturing strong teacher-student relationships is crucial for increasing student engagement. Creating a positive and supportive learning environment that encourages active participation and collaboration can significantly enhance students' learning outcomes and overall satisfaction. As for future research, it is recommended to broaden the scope beyond WEIRD populations (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) and employ ethnographic approaches to further explore the complex dynamics of student learning. This will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the diverse factors influencing learning behaviours and the effectiveness of the recommended practices in different cultural and educational contexts.

Keywords: higher education, learning theory, student learning

1 Introduction

Fostering independent learning, alongside offering appropriate support, plays a pivotal role in nurturing essential skills during higher education and facilitating personal growth. Thus, prioritising student learning is the teachers' top priority in the context of higher education. As educators, teachers engage their experience, enthusiasm, and pedagogical skills toward allowing students to attain their greatest potential, with a steadfast commitment to developing intellectual growth, critical thinking, and skill development (Biggs and Tang, 2011; Pritchard, 2017). Teachers that prioritise student learning also recognise the significant influence they have on changing the brains, views, and future trajectories of their students. This article delves into these crucial aspects. With a case-study approach, the article aims to deliberate on the learning process from the students' own perspective. By gaining insights into how students learn, teachers can refine their instructional methods, create more effective learning experiences, and ultimately enhance student outcomes.

While the ultimate objective of teaching is to facilitate learning (Bullough, 1997; Hattie and Larsen, 2020), traditional education systems around the world often focus more on teaching itself rather than the actual process of learning (Ackoff and Greenberg, 2008; Hase and Kenyon, 2013; Biesta, 2012; 2017). According to Ackoff and Greenberg (2008), this approach mistakenly assumes a direct correlation between teaching and learning, disregarding the fact that much of what individuals learn occurs independently, both before and after formal education. Critically so, Ackoff and Greenberg (2008) maintain that the modern western education system (Bowen, 2020), as it stands, is fundamentally flawed due to its emphasis on teaching over learning—a perspective supported by the World Development Report (WDR) of 2018, which highlights that access to education does not guarantee effective learning outcomes.

In light of these insights, it becomes crucial for teachers (who act as facilitators of learning), to recognise the specific needs of their students in order to determine appropriate teaching content and assessments (Biggs, 1987; 1996; Biggs and Tang, 2011). Using only multiple-choice knowledge examinations as assessment methods, for example, does not correspond well with the purpose of strengthening communication skills. It is essential to acknowledge that effective communication skills are unlikely to be acquired solely through theoretical knowledge; they require practical application and practice. This notion is encapsulated in the concept of *constructive alignment*, which emphasises aligning learning activities, assessments, and desired learning outcomes (Biggs, 1996; Biggs and Tang, 2011). However, it is equally important for teachers to ensure that their actions align with the students' learning process. In the aforementioned example, while students may engage in conversations and receive feedback, it remains uncertain whether this approach effectively fosters the development of communication skills (Halim et al., 2019; Murphy et al., 2008).

These uncertainties and gaps in understanding form the basis for the exploration undertaken in this article: to investigate how students learn and identify ways in which teachers can meaningfully contribute to their learning process. By gaining insights into the learning process from the student's perspective, as previously mentioned, teachers can refine their instructional methods, create more effective learning experiences, and ultimately enhance student outcomes. These insights can serve as valuable guidance for conducting further studies in various contexts. Yet

2 Materials and Methods

My underlying motivations for this research were both intrinsic and instrumental (Thomas, 2011). As a teacher in higher education, specifically in the North East of England, as part of my own professional development I set out to gain a comprehensive understanding of my potential role in relation to my own students and their learning. This article draws from a specific case and specific conditions. The students in question (who all feature in this article) were enrolled in a social sciences module that explored the intricate interactions between social, cultural, biological, and evolutionary factors in the realm of health and disease. It is worth noting, however, that this module was open to students from diverse academic and disciplinary backgrounds—thus, opening up for widespread multidisciplinary and interprofessional experiences. Specifically, this article derives from a qualitative case study conducted in 2018, where I employed semi-structured interviews as the primary research method (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2008; Bernard, 2011; Skinner, 2013). The study sought to principally address this question: What tactics and approaches do UK students in higher education use to organise their studies and learning process, and how do these aspects affect their proclivity for study motivation? As such, this question also guides the article. The originality lies in the case material, which provides new insights into the processes involved in the (self-directed) learning process amongst students in higher education.

Whereas the reason for the geographical location of the said study was both intrinsic (i.e., part of the author's training for professional development) and instrumental (i.e., where the author lived and worked), there are many insights to be gained from looking at the UK (and the North East of England, specifically). Politically speaking, this concerns the impact of devolution from a centralised UK governance model on

universities in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England (Shattock and Horvath, 2020). The established structure now holds the UK Government directly accountable for overseeing English higher education, which happens to be the largest among the four systems. However, the devolved nations frequently find themselves formulating policies that react to or contradict those implemented by the English system. This raises the question of whether devolution has been beneficial for the English system (Shattock and Horvath, 2020). Had it not been for political representation from Scotland and Wales, which hold different viewpoints, the freedom to pursue a fully market-oriented policy, reinforcing differentiation between institutions and promoting a 'business model' of institutional governance, might have faced resistance in England (Shattock and Horvath, 2020). As a region, the North East of England becomes significant here due to its financial wellbeing. Despite overall economic growth in the country, the North East region witnessed the most significant contraction amongst the nine English regions during the third quarter of 2021 (Keighley, 2022; Brown, 2023). This, alongside its 'distinct industrial working-class culture' (Byrne, 2010; Lloyd, 2012) often seen to 'stand out' from higher education (Reay et al., 2010), makes the North East of England an interesting case for making sense of tactics and approaches to learning and proclivity for study motivation.

That said, however, this article primarily engages with reflections apropos local conditions in higher education (in this case, a university in the North East of England) and does not seek to provide an exhaustive account of the phenomenon (i.e., how HE students approach their learning) in question. Additionally, two practitioner inquiries also guided the study: 1) understanding how students organised their studies, and 2) identifying potential barriers to effective study practices. While these inquiries provided valuable insights through reflective processes, they served as guiding principles rather than strict frameworks. The participants in this study were all first-year undergraduate students aged between 18 and 21 who voluntarily chose to take part. In total six self-selected students were interviewed; four women and two men, with each interview lasting about 1 or 2 hours. All interviews were later transcribed and coded using a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Prior to their interviews, I obtained informed consent from each participant. It is important to note that some responses were context-specific to the point where individuals' identities could be easily discerned when analysed as a group. To ensure the anonymity and personal integrity of the participants, pseudonyms were used in conjunction with direct quotes (Kaiser, 2009).

With respect to my own academic background, I am trained in anthropology. Thus, I approached the execution and analysis of the interviews with an anthropological mind-set to capture the richness of the students' world (Barnard, 2000; Eriksen, 2015). It is crucial to recognise that student behaviour extends beyond classroom activities, readings, and assignments; it encompasses their lives beyond academia (Kuh, 1993; Nuthall, 2007). Students are autonomous individuals with multifaceted lives, and this aspect was a vital consideration in designing the named study. However, it is also important to acknowledge the limitations of the study. Due to practical constraints, it was not feasible to delve into the in-depth descriptions typically associated with ethnographic research (Eriksen 2015). Moreover, relying solely on interviews can provide only partial understandings, as there may be discrepancies between what people say, what they do, and what they claim to do. I was cognizant of the possibility that students might provide socially desirable responses, telling me what they believed I wanted to hear (Mathie and Wakeling, 2011). To mitigate this, the focus of the interviews centred on the respondents' general approaches to their studies and learning, rather than solely on the specific module from which they were recruited.

As both the researcher and the teacher, I had to exercise restraint and resist the temptation to divert the interviews towards addressing knowledge gaps or anomalies that could have implications beyond teaching practice. However, being intimately involved as their teacher provided me with a deeper understanding of the context referenced by the students compared to an outsider. It allowed me to grasp their perspective while maintaining enough distance to avoid becoming overly immersed and potentially losing sight of the broader picture (Eriksen, 2015).

2.1 Case Study as Method

Following the introductory segment, in this section I provide a more detailed rationale for conducting a case study using a qualitative methodology, specifically focusing on a small interview sample of six participants. Specifically, the principal aim of this article is to engage with reflections on local conditions in higher education (through personal narratives) rather than aiming to provide an exhaustive account of the phenomenon under investigation. By elaborating on the key points, we can highlight the value and significance of this research approach (Peen and Arshad, 2014).

First of all, a case study with a small interview sample allows for a focused and in-depth exploration of the phenomenon within a specific local context (Dworkin, 2012). By limiting the number of interviews, researchers can spend more time and effort engaging with each participant, thereby gaining a deeper understanding of their perspectives, experiences, and the nuances of the local conditions. Researchers can also invest more time and effort into establishing trust, fostering open communication, and creating a comfortable environment for participants to share their perspectives (Knott et al., 2022; Vasileiou et al., 2018). This approach facilitates a rich exploration of the topic of interest and enables the researcher to capture the intricacies that may be overlooked in larger-scale studies (Dworkin, 2012). Additionally, the researcher's reflexivity is enhanced as they can invest more attention in analysing and interpreting the data from each interview, enabling a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon (Hennink and Kaiser, 2022).

Furthermore, qualitative research methodologies, such as case studies, emphasise the importance of understanding phenomena within their specific contexts (Marshall et al., 2013; Knott et al., 2022). By conducting interviews with a small sample of participants, researchers can closely examine how local conditions shape and influence the phenomenon being studied. This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the unique factors, cultural norms, and contextual influences that contribute to the phenomenon's manifestation in the local setting (Dworkin, 2012; Knott et al., 2022). Consequently, the research outcomes can provide valuable insights for developing context-specific interventions or strategies, whereby the qualitative richness can provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon's subjective dimensions and facilitate the development of meaningful interpretations. Also, in terms of feasibility and resource optimisation, a case study with a small interview sample is often more feasible and resource-efficient, particularly when researchers have limited time, budget, or access to participants (Marshall et al., 2013; Vasileiou et al., 2018). Conducting a study with a smaller sample reduces logistical challenges and can be accomplished within a shorter timeframe. Furthermore, analysing a smaller dataset is more manageable, allowing researchers to thoroughly examine and interpret the data collected from each interview (Dworkin, 2012; Hennink and Kaiser, 2022). This approach optimises the utilisation of available resources, ensuring a focused and high-quality study within the given constraints.

In summary, I maintain that conducting a case study with a small interview sample of six participants provides a range of benefits for engaging with reflections on local conditions in higher education. By adopting a qualitative methodology, researchers can explore the phenomenon within its specific context, capturing the richness and depth of data from each participant. The smaller sample size allows for in-depth engagement, participant rapport, and resource optimisation, while ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the local conditions influencing the phenomenon. Overall, this research approach facilitates a nuanced exploration of the topic, providing valuable insights for both academic research and practical applications in the local context.

3 Theory

In this section, I provide a framework for interpreting the findings of the current study in ways that could advance our conceptual understanding of both the process of independent learning and self-regulation

(and how they can be assimilated in teaching). I have categorised the framework into three rubrics: 1) self-regulated learning, 2) what is learning? and 3) individual differences in the learning process.

3.1 Self-regulated learning

At the heart of this article lies the phenomenon of self-regulated learning, which overall comes to encapsulate my respondents' experiences very well. Self-regulated learning, as such, refers to the ability of individuals to take control of their own learning process (Boekaerts, 1999; Kremer-Hayon and Tillema, 1999; Zimmerman, 2002; 2015). It involves actively monitoring and managing one's learning activities, emotions, and motivations to achieve academic goals effectively. Self-regulated learners exhibit a range of cognitive, metacognitive, and motivational strategies that contribute to their success in acquiring knowledge and skills. Cognitive strategies include activities such as organising and structuring information, elaborating on key concepts, and using mnemonic techniques to enhance memory (Pintrich, 2000; Schunk, 2005). Metacognitive strategies involve planning, setting goals, monitoring progress, and evaluating one's own learning. Motivational strategies focus on managing motivation, self-efficacy, and persistence in the face of challenges.

Self-regulated learning is a dynamic and iterative process, with learners continuously reflecting on their performance, adapting their strategies, and making changes based on feedback and self-assessment. It promotes deep understanding, engagement, and lifelong learning skills. Educators can support the development of self-regulated learning by providing explicit instruction, modelling effective strategies, fostering a supportive learning environment, and offering timely feedback and guidance (Boekaerts, 1999; Brody and Ge, 2001; Russell et al., 2020). By cultivating self-regulatory skills, learners become more independent, motivated, and effective in managing their own learning journeys.

Self-regulated learning has been a topic of intense research interest for many years, as it plays a crucial role in enhancing learning outcomes and promoting the development of cognitive abilities. The body of literature stretches far and wide, but in this article, I have gone with a chosen few, which I contend offer notably valuable insights into different aspects of self-regulated learning and its implementation in educational contexts. One key finding highlighted in the literature is the importance of self-regulation in teacher education programmes. For instance, Kremer-Hayon and Tillema (1998) emphasise that self-regulation should be integrated into teacher education curricula, as it can benefit prospective teachers in their own learning and future teaching practices. However, the authors also note that implementing self-regulation in teacher education requires careful consideration of organisational and curricular factors. Namely, teaching is a field driven by the practical knowledge and perspectives of educators, rather than solely relying on theoretical frameworks proposed by researchers and philosophers of education (Kremer-Hayon and Tillema, 1998, p. 518). Therefore, it is crucial to understand the perceptions of practitioners, particularly in relation to self-regulated learning (SRL). However, the exploration of SRL within the context of teacher education has been relatively limited, making it even more valuable to gain insights from educators in this field. By uncovering the perceptions of teacher educators and student teachers regarding SRL, we can better comprehend the challenges and opportunities associated with implementing self-regulation strategies in teacher education programmes. This knowledge can inform the development of effective approaches to foster SRL in future teachers, ultimately benefiting the quality of education they provide to their students (Kremer-Hayon and Tillema, 1998).

This relates to the role of teacher educators in promoting SRL, which is another important aspect that has been covered well in the literature. In another study of theirs, Tillema and Kremer-Hayon (2002) found that teacher educators face professional dilemmas related to their conceptions of teaching and learning when attempting to support SRL in their students. Interestingly, their study revealed a discrepancy between what teacher educators themselves do in terms of self-regulated learning and what they teach their students, suggesting a need for alignment between theory and practice. Namely, the theory-practice dilemma in education extends to the challenge of attitudinal change and bridging the gap between

attitudes and behaviours (Tillema and Kremer-Hayon, 2002, p. 604). When it comes to adopting self-regulated learning (SRL) strategies in teaching, a shift in attitudes is often necessary. However, this process of attitudinal change is not always easy or quick, posing a significant hurdle for teacher educators. As Tillema and Kremer-Hayon show (2002), teacher educators are confronted with limited time and resources, making it challenging to support teachers in undergoing the necessary shifts in their attitudes towards teaching and learning. Furthermore, Tillema and Kremer-Hayon argue that it remains important to acknowledge that attitudinal change does not automatically translate into behavioural change (2002, p. 604). Even if teachers develop positive attitudes towards SRL, they may still struggle to effectively implement these strategies in their teaching practices. This further complicates the theory-practice dilemma faced by teacher educators, as they need to address not only the transformation of attitudes but also the practical application of SRL in the classroom.

What is more, professional development models focused on SRL are also highlighted in the literature as effective means to support teachers' instructional shifts. Specifically, Butler and colleagues (2004) describe a collaborative inquiry model that successfully facilitated teachers' reflection on practice and conceptual knowledge construction. This model, grounded in socially shared cognition and self-regulated learning, resulted in important instructional shifts (Butler et al., 2004). Such findings underscore the potential of professional development programmes in fostering teachers' self-regulated learning and improving their teaching practices. As Butler and colleagues (2004) show, evidence suggests that teachers' use of SCL became independent, "even as support from the principal researcher was faded" (p. 448). Alas, cultural factors and external constraints are also found to influence the perception and implementation of SRL-based instruction. In a study from 2013, Lau explores how Chinese language teachers in Hong Kong perceived and implemented SRL-based instruction. The study (Lau, 2013) reveals that factors such as the nature of SRL-based instruction, cultural context, and external support influenced teachers' implementation of this instructional approach. Understanding these factors is crucial for effective integration of SRL into diverse educational settings. Previous studies conducted in China, as Lau (2013) shows, have predominantly examined the characteristics of self-regulated learners among Chinese students. In contrast, Lau's study (2013) offers a fresh perspective by shifting the research focus from students to teachers, presenting a novel approach to SRL research in Chinese educational contexts. By exploring the role of teachers in self-regulated learning, the study fills an important gap in the existing literature. While understanding students' self-regulated learning abilities is undoubtedly valuable, investigating teachers' perspectives and practices in promoting SRL provides a comprehensive understanding of the educational ecosystem (Lau, 2013, p. 65). Teachers play a pivotal role in facilitating and guiding students' learning processes, and their own understanding and implementation of SRL strategies significantly influence student outcomes.

Looking at another perspective of SRL, we can find the significance of experiential learning is highlighted in Michalsky and Schechter's (2013) study. By integrating systematic learning from problematic and successful experiences into teacher preparatory programmes, preservice teachers improved their capacity to promote students' self-regulated learning (Michalsky and Schechter, 2013). This emphasises the need for incorporating real-life teaching experiences into teacher education to enhance SRL practices. In their study, Michalsky and Schechter (2013) employed a quasi-experimental design to investigate the impact of integrating systematic retrospective learning from both problematic and successful experiences into teachers' preparatory programmes. Specifically, they focused on preservice physics teachers and examined how this approach influenced their ability to teach students self-regulation in learning. The results of the study revealed significant differences between preservice teachers who reflected upon both problematic and successful experiences compared to those who only considered problematic experiences (Michalsky and Schechter, 2013, p. 71). The former group demonstrated greater improvement in their actual teaching of self-regulated learning strategies and in creating effective self-regulated learning environments. By engaging in reflective practices that encompass both challenging and successful teaching experiences,

preservice teachers were able to enhance their understanding and implementation of self-regulation strategies (Michalsky and Schechter, 2013). This comprehensive approach enabled them to gain valuable insights into the diverse aspects of self-regulated learning and apply this knowledge more effectively in their instructional practices. These findings underscore the importance of integrating systematic retrospective learning into teacher preparatory programmes (Michalsky and Schechter, 2013, p. 71). Namely, by encouraging preservice teachers to reflect on a range of experiences, including both successes and challenges, we can better equip them with the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively teach self-regulated learning to their future students.

Developing valid and reliable instruments to measure teachers' self-efficacy in implementing SRL is another important aspect addressed in the literature. For instance, De Smul and colleagues (2018) describe the development of the Teacher Self-Efficacy Scale to implement Self-Regulated Learning (TSES-SRL). This instrument specifically assesses teachers' perceived competence in implementing SRL. The development of such instruments helps in evaluating and improving the effectiveness of interventions aimed at promoting SRL among teachers (De Smul et al., 2018). In relation to this, the role of teacher professional development programmes in improving teachers' knowledge of SRL has also been examined. As an example, Xu and Ko (2019) investigate how a teacher professional development programme based on the principles of Communities of Practice (CoP) influenced teachers' knowledge of SRL-based instruction. Their study demonstrates that participating teachers' understanding of SRL shifted from emphasising student autonomy to creating a high-SRL classroom environment (Xu and Ko, 2019). This highlights the transformative potential of professional development experiences in shaping teachers' understanding and practice of SRL. Among the participants in the study, a significant shift in understanding was observed among the majority of teachers. Specifically, eight out of eleven teachers transformed their perspective on self-regulated learning (SRL) instruction (Xu and Ko, 2019, p. 112). Initially, these teachers held the belief that students should have complete autonomy in self-studying a topic. However, as a result of their involvement in the study, the teachers' understanding evolved towards recognising the importance of the teacher's role in establishing a pastoral SRL classroom environment. This change in understanding, Xu and Ko argue (2019) signifies a notable shift in pedagogical approach. The teachers began to acknowledge the significance of actively creating a high-SRL classroom environment, where they play a vital role in guiding and supporting students' self-regulated learning journeys (Xu and Ko, 2019, p. 112). By assuming a more proactive role, these teachers recognised the value of providing structure, guidance, and instructional support to foster students' development of self-regulation skills.

In their study from 2022, Cleary and colleagues investigated the effects of a professional development workshop on high school teachers' knowledge, self-efficacy, and skills in applying SRL. The findings of the study shed light on the substantial improvements observed in teachers' understanding and implementation of SRL following their participation in the workshop (Cleary et al., 2022). Specifically, the results highlight the positive impact of the professional development programme on teachers' attitudes and perspectives towards SRL. Teachers who demonstrated advanced SRL skills showcased more positive attitudes, flexibility, and responsiveness in their approaches to implementing SRL in the classroom (Cleary et al., 2022). This indicates that the workshop not only enhanced their theoretical knowledge but also influenced their practical application of SRL strategies. Cleary and colleagues (2022) emphasise the significance of equipping teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively implement SRL in their teaching practices. By providing targeted professional development opportunities, educators can enhance their understanding of SRL and its benefits, leading to more favourable attitudes and adaptable instructional approaches to education. As such, these findings underscore the importance of ongoing professional development programmes that specifically address SRL (Cleary et al., 2022). By empowering teachers with advanced SRL skills, they are better equipped to create supportive and engaging learning environments that foster students' self-regulation capabilities. On the whole, the study by Cleary and

colleagues (2022) highlights the potential of professional development workshops to positively impact teachers' attitudes, perspectives, and implementation of SRL strategies in the classroom.

3.2 What is learning?

Another imperative question to this article, and one that perhaps foregrounds the issue at hand, is: what is learning? Thus, it becomes imperative, as such, to distinguish *learning* from *teaching*. In brief, learning refers to the acquisition of knowledge, skills, or understanding through study, experience, or being taught (Hattie, 2009; 2023; Hattie and Yates, 2013). It is an active process in which individuals engage with information, make connections, and develop new insights or abilities. Learning is a multifaceted and personal experience that occurs within the learner's mind. It involves processing, assimilating, and applying information to enhance one's knowledge and skills (Biesta, 2020). Teaching, on the other hand, refers to the deliberate act of imparting knowledge, skills, or information to others (Biesta, 2012; 2017; Hattie, 2012). It involves planned activities, strategies, and interactions designed to facilitate learning in individuals or groups. Teaching, as such, encompasses the process of organising and presenting information in a structured manner, employing instructional methods, and guiding learners to achieve specific learning objectives (Biesta, 2020; Hattie and Larsen, 2020).

While learning is primarily focused on the learner's perspective, teaching is centred on the facilitator's role in creating opportunities and providing resources for learning to take place (Biesta, 2012; 2017; Hattie, 2012). Effective teaching involves understanding learners' needs, employing appropriate instructional techniques, and creating a supportive and engaging learning environment. Nevertheless, learning and teaching are intertwined and mutually dependent (Biesta, 2020; Hattie and Larsen, 2020). Teaching sets the stage for learning by providing guidance, resources, and opportunities for learners to engage with new information. However, learning ultimately occurs within the learner, as they actively process and make meaning out of the information presented (Hattie, 2009; 2023). Teachers play a crucial role in supporting and facilitating learning, but learners themselves are responsible for their own learning and must actively participate and engage in the educational process.

There are many learning theories, most of which are not mutually exclusive but complementary and/or build on each other (Leonard, 2002; Schunk, 2012). However, it falls outside of this article's scope to review the body of literature that details them; this is described in detail elsewhere (e.g., Leonard, 2002; Pritchard, 2017). Rather, this article seeks to contextualise the complexity of student learning apropos self-regulation in higher education through a case study from the UK. That said, in classroom management (but also in frequent and ongoing feedback and repeated practice) the archetypal behaviourist ideas of reward and punishment are still very much prevalent (Stewart, 2021). Martyn Stewart writes (2021) that the application of scientific methods to the study of learning in the early 20th century "brought new perspectives in which understanding the learning process was based purely on what could be observed and measured" (p. 4). Later on, the cognitive and social-constructivism theories—including the renowned theories of Jean Piaget (1964) and Lev Vygotsky (1978)—helped to explain how the learning of more complex and abstract concepts takes place by confrontation with new information, which students fit into what they have previously learned or to which they adjust their existing understandings (Stewart, 2021). It is also recognised that each step in the learning process should be guided (by practice) to fit the current level of each student. Humanist perspectives later added that teachers should act as facilitators and coaches to help each individual achieve self-actualisation (Schunk, 2012; Tangney, 2014). This individualist approach relates to aspects such as level and interest—and should not be confused with individualism in the learning process, which in fact often takes place in a social context where learners construct knowledge and insights together and challenge and support each other (Kaur, 2012; Stewart, 2021).

Still, these insights prove difficult to translate into guidelines for effective teaching. Educational study results are often context-specific and hard to replicate (Perry and See, 2022). We see this reflected in the experience of teachers; that is, how theories are far removed from practice (Henning et al., 2009).

Teachers more often work through methods of trial and error or make evaluations in the form of case studies and action research, which allow for more specific within-context conclusions (Henning et al., 2009; West, 2011). A problem with this is that teachers tend to see their lessons as effective if students show behavioural engagement in the form of task-behaviour and lack of disruptive behaviour (Pedler et al., 2020). These types of engagement, however, give no guarantee that students are learning. It is simply the behaviour that is most visible to the teacher (Nuthall, 2005). Graham Nuthall, together with various other researchers, extensively studied the processes of teaching and learning in upper elementary school (New Zealand/Aotearoa) and discovered with audio and video recordings that there is a lot more going on for students in the classroom than the teacher can be aware of (e.g., whispers, jokes, distractions, et cetera) (Alton Lee et al., 1993; Nuthall, 2004; 2005). The next section considers this in more detail.

3.3 Individual differences in the learning process

This article draws inspiration from the educational research of Graham Nuthall, who conducted research on learning and teaching for over forty years. Nuthall discovered that at the start of learning a concept (i.e., knowledge or skills), students already mastered about half (see Nuthall, 2005). However, because it was variable which half, there was only a small percentage of shared knowledge in the classroom (Nuthall, 2004; 2005; 2007). This poses a challenge to teachers. Whereas teachers traditionally offer education to a group of students, each student has a unique combination of prior knowledge, interest, and commitment (in line with the humanist perspective; Tangney, 2014). The solution, Nuthall described, became classroom teaching practices structured by ‘ritualised routines’ to which students responded by showing the abovementioned engagement behaviours (e.g., reading, writing, and answering questions); behaviours that said little about whether they were actually learning (Nuthall, 2005). In line with the zone of proximal development (e.g., Allal and Pelgrims Ducrey, 2000), a granular analysis of individual learning processes revealed that learning occurred as a sequence of events that each build on the previous one (Nuthall, 1999; 2005). That is, not the specific learning activities, but whether the information made sense to the learner at that moment determined learning. Students learned a concept when they had been exposed to the complete set of information three times (Nuthall, 1999; 2005); a finding which at the time of its discovery was considered ground-breaking. This explains why universal laws of effective teaching are hard to find and why even teaching that is supposed to align with individual learning styles (by offering different types of activities) makes little difference apropos learning outcomes (Scott, 2010).

Furthermore, Nuthall (2005; 2007) also discovered that those students who showed the most learning actually created more learning experiences—by asking questions, talking to other people about the concepts, and so forth. This explains why more extensive measures of engagement that includes these kinds of behaviours, and/or motivation that drives these behaviours, are better predictors of learning than simple on-task behavioural measures (Pedler et al., 2020). Additionally, these behaviours were more often shown by students whose backgrounds provided them with the cultural knowledge and skills to create these learning experiences, which explains cultural and intelligence effects (Nuthall, 2005). Here is the danger of self-fulfilling prophecies because students who feel incapable will also be less likely to create further learning opportunities for themselves and will stay dependent on what the teacher provides (Nuthall, 2005). What is more, it was found that assessments did not measure learning outcomes well because the system of ritualised routines was also expressed in a focus on a product (e.g., homework, a test result) that can be turned into data for the system, without knowing what actual knowledge, insights, and skills have been gained (Nuthall, 2005). In terms of John Biggs’ theory (1987; 1996), one could conclude that the traditional alignment questions: “Is what we are teaching being tested?” (Anderson, 2002, p. 255) and “Are we teaching what is being tested?” (Anderson, 2002, p. 256) might be better rephrased as a more complex question, that is: Do our tests reveal if students have learned what they were supposed to learn and to what extent has education contributed to this?

Nuthall's findings among elementary education align well with those found in higher education. Interview studies among psychology undergraduate students in Scotland (Maclellan and Soden, 2007) and teacher students in Australia (Askill-Williams et al., 2007) revealed that individual student experiences were varied with respect to the extent to which they were provided with matching learning experiences. Students experienced their learning processes to be more effective if the teacher helped align the information with their current understanding, such as by better explaining what they could not yet grasp. Moreover, students identified several behaviours that were beneficial for their learning (e.g., asking questions), that similar to Nuthall's findings, seemed to create more learning experiences. Yet, the student's meta-knowledge seemed limited, and the creation of learning experiences was impeded by a mismatch with prior levels of knowledge (Askill-Williams et al., 2007; Maclellan and Soden, 2007).

These findings relate closely to the concept of 'self-regulated learning', which refers to the autonomy and control of students throughout their learning process (Russell et al., 2020), including the planning, engagement in learning activities, monitoring of progression, and self-evaluating (Pintrich, 2000; Zimmerman, 2002). According to Monique Boekaerts' (1999) model, self-regulated learning involves three aspects: the modes, the process, and the self. Regulating processing modes is about the way of learning, the quality. Here, for example, it is about deep or superficial learning; something that the student often attunes to the way in which what is learned is to be tested or applied (e.g., application of knowledge or reproduction; McCune and Entwistle, 2011). Regulation of the learning process is about monitoring, evaluating, and correcting the learning process. Above that is the motivation of the self. This includes whether students experience sufficient self-efficacy, and motivation, and where for example, the mentioned self-fulfilling prophecy can disturb the underlying processes. As argued by Colin Bryson (2014), teachers can affect these processes by encouraging engagement—not only in quantity, but also in quality—such as when teacher provide trust and inspiration and foster engagement focused on learning and understanding instead of on output and delivery.

What is more is that George Kuh's work (1993) emphasises the impact of out-of-class experiences in student lives. He argues that, for this reason, in order to enhance student engagement, education needs to transcend the artificial boundaries in teaching and learning. Educational institutions, Kuh writes (1993), must make classroom experiences more productive, alongside encouraging students to devote more of their time outside the classroom to educationally purposeful activities. Higher education does after all, as Linda Leach and Nick Zepke (2012) phrase it, involve both transactional engagement and active citizenship. Students and teachers will engage with each other and have to work together to enable challenges to social beliefs and practices (Leach and Zepke, 2012; Bryson, 2014).

4 Results

In this section, I will present the findings of the study based on a comprehensive analysis of the interview data. Three key themes have emerged from the analysis, namely: 1) lack of representation, 2) self-regulated learning in practice, and 3) group work and conflicting values. Following the presentation of these results, I will engage in a detailed discussion of the implications and significance of these findings.

4.1 Lack of representation

A first finding, that at the same time forms a limitation of the study, was that the self-selected respondents were not representative of the UK student population—and certainly not in terms of ethnic or socioeconomic background. They were all of White (British) descent, which can also be said about the majority of students who were enrolled on the said module. While the situation came with its limitations this was in itself an interesting observation, considering how one of the greatest barriers to "addressing race equality in higher education is academia's refusal to regard race as a legitimate object of scrutiny, either in scholarship or policy" (Warmington, 2018, p. V). Heidi Safia Mirza writes (2018) that apropos the UK, in the employment outcomes for minority ethnic groups with degrees, 'aspirations are clearly not

a problem' (p. 9). Namely, ethnic minorities are more likely than the majority (White) group to have degree-level education. That said, alas, students from "ethnic minorities in the UK are less likely to obtain good degrees than (...) White students" (Richardson, 2018, p. 89). Ethnic minorities are also significantly under-represented among "academics working in UK universities and face institutional bias when applying for academic jobs and for internal promotion" (Boliver, 2008, p. 82; see also Arday 2015; Bhopal and Jackson 2013). However, I want to reiterate that all student respondents who took part in this named study volunteered to participate. Due to my role as their teacher, I deemed it very inappropriate to approach specific individuals about participating and instead chose to solely rely on self-volunteering (a limitation needless to say, yet of great ethical concern).

Next to this consideration, none of my respondents was a first-generation scholar but rather, all came from families where both parents hold university degrees. For clarification, first-generation scholar is a term often used to refer to "students whose parents do not have a university degree, but also more expansively to mean students from a wide range of 'non-traditional' backgrounds" (Hindle et al., 2021, p. 1). While the term does not appear much around the UK, it is widely used in the United States where it often stands in for students from minority ethnic backgrounds. What is presented in this article thus seems to be a partial ethnographic account (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010) of what is referred to as WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialised, rich, and democratic) population's approaches to learning (with a regional focus on the North East of England) (Ekuni et al., 2020). This eliminated the possibility of including a wide array of perspectives in the study. Nevertheless, a partial ethnographic account implies a more situational focus (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000). Compared to ('complete') ethnography, partial ethnography "covers far less empirical grounds" (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000, p. 201) yet makes it easier to describe the empirical material so it remains open for other interpretations.

Having said that, it has been shown that parental encouragement to enter university does represent major motivational factors among many groups of students and this can be facilitated by parents who studied themselves (Bennett, 2004). In line with this, three of my respondents informed me:

My mother is Swiss, and she went to university in Switzerland. My father went to Oxford Brookes (...) And then he went to business school and then SOAS [University of London], and then Cambridge University. He loves education, basically. But yeah, no, my family have been fortunate in that respect for having education. There wasn't even a moment where it was an option for me not to go [to university]. (...)—it was always 'I'm going... unless something really bad happens to me. (Person A)

Yes, both my parents [went to university]. My dad is in finance, so he studied accounting and law, and my mum studied law... I never thought I wouldn't go to university; I always thought I would. But I've always really enjoyed school... the process of learning and everything, so it was all just quite logical. (Person B)

My mum and dad both went to university. Dad went to Loughborough [University] and studied history and he works as a teacher now. Mum and dad both did their PGCE [teacher training] and all, and mum used to be a teacher as well... I think mum and dad pushed me quite a lot [about going to university]—but in a good way, so they've always been there to support me and help me with my studies. And because I've studied history as well, which is what my dad specialises in; he's always been able to help me that little bit extra. And mum

taught physics, chemistry, and biology, so she helped me quite a lot with psychology. (Person C)

These quotes illustrate that decision to pursue a degree in higher education was never in question for these respondents. The latter respondent explicitly referred to the advantage of having educated parents in actual study-help. This parallels with Bryson's writing (2014) about in terms of students as active learners, which equally relates to Kuh's (1993) and Nuthall's (2007) work, respectively, on out-of-class experiences and the several dimensions of student lives. Namely, while students are active learners responsible for constructing their own knowledge, from a holistic perspective there are circumstances that may come to affect their active engagement and participation. Further, as noted by Nuthall (2007), it may also equip them with the necessary knowledge and skills to show behaviours that create more learning experiences. Similarly, Gene Brody and colleagues (Brody and Ge, 2001; Brody et al., 2005) have written that parental monitoring and setting standards regarding their children's performance was predictive of the children's behaviour of academic self-regulation. Whereas I am unable to make direct comparisons in this article, these previous findings alert us that first-generation university students would possibly provide different information.

4.2 Self-regulated learning in practice

In constructing the analysis, in this article I principally draw attention to student practices of academic self-regulation (Schunk, 2005). While the interviews themselves were predominantly directed through a set of eight questions (with improvised follow-up questions), there was one question that came to dominate the conversations: How do you organise your studies? There were three striking features in this. First, unlike previous studies (Askeff-Williams et al., 2007; Maclellan and Soden, 2007), I noticed that my respondents had conscious metacognitions by which they regulated their own learning. Second, there was a lot of focus on the time aspect and self-regulation to meet deadlines. Third, the respondents mentioned different tools and technologies. For example, one respondent shared:

I bought myself a little diary; an academic diary, [where] I have all my subjects written down... All my deadlines [are] written in the week that they're due and the week before that, so I have an extra week's notice, if you like. I have all my deadlines highlighted in my diary. And I have different folders for each topic, and at the end of every seminar or lecture I type up all my notes, print them off and put them in my folder along with my written notes as well. When I type up my notes, I've got the opportunity to research little bits that I find interesting... or if I don't understand something I can research it a bit more and put it in my typed notes. That's the main way I do it, but I also download all the PowerPoints and any teaching materials from [the learning platform] onto my laptop and put them in [digital] folders so I have them all if I need them.

This statement caught my attention, as the respondent on the one hand made comments about the regulation of the learning process, and on the other hand about the processing mode (Boekaerts, 1999). I decided to follow up by asking if they could in detail talk me through the preparations they make before any lectures or tutorial classes specifically, where they responded:

I read the PowerPoints through, but I try not to sort of type up any notes because... if you just sort of copy the PowerPoint you miss bits that [the lecturer] might say. So, I tend to read through the PowerPoint, I read the book chapter that [the lecturer has assigned]. If I find

something interesting, I'll do a little bit of research on it. But I try not to make notes from the PowerPoint before we've gone through the lecture, [while] during the lecture I write things down on the PowerPoint, but I always do it by hand—I never do it on my laptop the first time. I find that I can't reproduce [the material] and remember it if I do it on my laptop straight away.

While circulating PowerPoints early on may be beneficial for students overall, this respondent has noted that if they pay too much attention to what is on the PowerPoints beforehand, they might miss details that come up during the actual lectures. This, I believe, can be understood as a conscious meta-awareness of their own learning process, which they actively regulate.

Further, in terms of making use of a physical diary in planning their studies, I received a similar reply from another respondent:

I'm a big fan of the diary—a physical paper diary. It has every hour accounted for, so (...) I'll block out a morning to do an anthropology module or an essay (...) I've got quite a lot of free time, as I don't have any contact hours. So, it's quite... I think that's been a big jump from [secondary] school to university... having to make yourself do work and organise yourself, because no one will make you do it, and then you get to the deadline, you're like 'Oh no'. So, I try and have a bit of a routine because I just think that really helps me. So, there are certain days, like Thursday, I tend to do my reading, because then I'd have like a day of anthropology, and it sort of all works out well. I have like a set timetable that I impose on myself.

This respondent makes a valid observation here—namely, in recognising the transition from secondary to higher education. The expectation that students organise their own learning schedule contrasts itself with secondary education where (as my respondents allude to) so-called 'spoon-feeding' is a common practice (Raelin, 2009; Al-Saadi, 2011; Peen and Arshad, 2014). In the words of Joseph Raelin, spoon-feeding is a form of education where knowledge is seen as tangible and permanent, and thus "requires it to be transferred from the mind of the knower into the mind of the current or future user" (2009, p. 402). In spoon-feeding, epistemology is based on a representational model that parses knowledge and theoretical practice into a set of "detached, predictable, and teachable categories that can capture and explain management in spite of its inherently messy, fluctuating, and accidental nature" (Raelin, 2009, p. 402). Jenny Ozga and Laura Sukhnandan write (1998) that in the UK, many students feel poorly prepared for university life and thus find the transition very difficult. As one of their respondents expressed themselves, explicitly:

University should appreciate that you come to university having been spoon-fed through A levels, spoon-fed through GCSEs; it's your first time away from home, you know, you've been used to having Mum and Dad run you everywhere in the car and you've been used to having an awful lot of support... and suddenly you've got to deal with your education yourself, two degree subjects, finance, accommodation and homesickness and it would be nice for some consideration... (Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1998, p. 324)

Looking to the facilitators' perspective as well, Peter Benton (1999) shows in his survey that teachers at the level of SATs and GCSEs share a common feeling. Namely, the "need to deliver the 'right' answer has meant some teachers see themselves spoon-feeding classes too much and spending a disproportionate time on technicalities" (Benton, 1999, p. 530). More specifically, Benton writes that 65% of teachers surveyed "would agree with the proposition that 'I feel constrained by the examinations to spoon-feed my classes rather than letting them develop their own views...'" (p. 530). In the UK, SATs and GCSEs are incessantly being criticised by various teacher and parent organisations (e.g., *Let Our Kids be Kids*, *Meet the Parents*, and *Rescue Our Schools*; Sibley-White, 2018) for being systems built on "archaic, uninspiring curriculum" (Lewis, 2022) that essentially spoon-feed students with information in preparing them for exams. However, as Raelin writes, due to "pressures to conform to standardised classroom teaching" (2009, p. 401), the long tradition of 'spoon-feeding' students in education is unlikely to end anytime soon.

As I gathered from my interview data, most of my respondents struggled with this transition and had been offered little to no support from the education system. Much like with Ozga and Sukhnandan (1998), we find similar results in Hanna and colleagues' study (2014) of undergraduate pharmacy students in the UK. As the authors write, the transition from secondary school to university can be "challenging and there is increasing concern among academics that students are inadequately prepared for entry to university courses" (Hanna et al., 2014, p. 37). The students in question appeared 'insufficiently prepared for the demands of higher education' (ibid.) and expressed a desire for various aspects of their university educational experience, the authors write, to be more akin to that of previous school experiences—that is, "a greater level of individual attention [and] increased access to teaching staff" (Hanna et al., 2014, p. 37). In contrast to the previous quoted respondents, however, another respondent of mine revealed an alternative approach to daily planning. While in terms of self-regulation the result is very much comparable, this respondent explicitly applied a more technological, cloud-based approach to their learning:

So, I had a job last year and through that I basically found the wonderful use of Google Calendar. So, everything I do is on Google Calendar ready for me. Yeah, I just look through what I've got, so you know, 'meeting for interview' now, and it will remind me half an hour before every single thing I've got. So, I organise it like that, and then when we get set work and stuff [...] like a presentation or something I'll basically tell myself 'As soon as I get back [home] I've got to write down everything' of that sort, and then I've got kind of a physical written thing on my desk that will tell me what to do. And then I try and plan when I'm going to do it accordingly and put it in [Google Calendar]. Yeah, Google Calendar is really useful to me... especially now, because... like at school you have such a fixed timetable, where even if you [...] have free periods every now and again, but you'd always [...] go through till then. If I went to the gym, it would always be at the same time every day, when I had a space for that. But now because it's so different, much more like real life, it's really useful having that, to be able to do that. And then I try and do a bit of reading most nights as well. [...] But I do leave myself gaps as well, for like the social stuff or whatever.

I subsequently asked about the rationale behind using Google Calendar, and similar 'digital' technologies where they followed up with saying:

I like Google Calendar because... particularly from my [previous working experiences]. If I'd email someone about a meeting and they'd say 'yes', it's very easy for you to transfer it over to the Calendar. So, I've got to work out how I can do that, because I want to transfer my

university one over as well, so it becomes easy for me to do that. So, at the moment I've got to then go in and type it all up into Google Calendar, which is annoying.

Again, there is a referenced back to secondary school and how the now dissimilar circumstances affect their daily habits. In transitioning from a routine characterised by a 'fixed timetable' to one where self-discipline is key, the interviewee recognises the need for a strategy that would enhance their learning. Barry Zimmerman writes that novice learners typically rely on "naïve forms of self-regulatory processes, such as setting nonspecific distal goals, using nonstrategic methods, inaccurate forms of self-monitoring" (2015, p. 541). However, this does not apply to the student interviews which this article draws on. In fact, I would consider the strategies the respondents apply anything but 'naïve'—by contrast, they display effective, adaptive, and mindful forms of self-regulatory processes to positively adapt and respond to normal and adverse situations in their studies.

4.3 Group work and conflicting values

As explained by social-constructivism, learning is thought to often take place in interactions with others. Zimmerman writes that most contemporary self-regulation theorists "have avoided absolute distinctions between internal and external control of learning and have envisioned self-regulation in broader, more interactive terms" (2015, p. 541). Specifically, he writes that students can self-regulate their learning "not only through covert cognitive means but also through overt behavioural means, such as selecting, modifying, or constructing advantageous personal environments or seeking social support" (2015, p. 541). Namely, Zimmerman argues that the learner's disposition of the self is not merely limited to its customised forms of learning but includes self-coordinated collective forms of learning as well. Here personal outcomes are achieved through the actions of others, "such as family members, teammates, or friends, or through use of physical environment resources, such as tools" (Zimmerman, 2015, p. 541). As such, Biggs writes that (1996) implementing collaboration in the whole learning process helps fostering teaching and learning between the students themselves—well in line with the ethos of constructivism. Personally, I agree with Biggs (1996), and introduced the enrolled students to both independent and collective approaches to learning in the aforementioned module. However, it does put different values of responsibility and self-regulation against one another. For instance, my respondents' different experiences of group work were very much brought to the surface during our interviews.

One of my respondents for instance, has had good experience of group work and found these sessions to be useful in their own learning:

Yeah, I did [find group work useful] [...] I think especially at university everyone's there for a reason. They enjoy their subjects, so it's really interesting to hear other people's perspectives [...] and discuss them, and sort of develop your ideas together. I think 'cos none of us had really thought about the way [ethnographies] are structured, before the session, because we'd only read one. But then when talking to each other we realised there was quite a difference, and so with that was a topic of discussion that we hadn't really thought of before. [...] I think with independent work it's more about reading, and I think, as well, you just... I don't know, you have to be more prepared to write an essay than to go to a group discussion. You're more flexible in a group discussion, and it's more about ideas and kind of seeing what works and what doesn't, whereas in an essay you kind of have to make a conclusion. They're quite different but I enjoy them both in different ways, yeah.

We can clearly mark out Biggs' (1987; 1996) argument here. In this case, the students' inexperience with one certain topic (i.e., ethnographies) was the factor that helped fostering teaching and learning between them—thus transforming their independent self-regulation practices into a collective strategy for self-efficacy. That is, the “motivational beliefs regarding personal competence to accomplish a task” (Zimmerman, 2015, p. 541). Another respondent showed active shaping of the learning environment in this respect, by applying it out-of-class:

I did [the preparations] with [my friend] and firstly we read [the assigned book]. We share books, which is much cheaper for us. They're always out of the library, it's really annoying... so yeah, we read that initially and then we [...] looked at a couple of articles online... I was quite interested in [...] one of the case studies, and I looked that one up and then I went down a bit of a rabbit hole of looking at these different things. So, we did that, and then kind of did a Word doc [...] and then [at the seminar] we did some more because we realised, we were saying what everyone else was saying. As we share the books... one of us will probably take the book for like three days or something and read over it. Not 'cos it takes us that long to read, but just because like... logistics of leaving stuff around and whatnot. And then we'll swap over, and then in college [...] we'll meet there and have a chat about it and then maybe look up some more stuff.

Here we see the difference between a (first quote) fitting learning experience, and (second quote) behaviour through which more learning experiences are created, as was also observed to be an individual difference among children (Nuthall, 2005). As the latter quote illustrates, the respondent openly shares resources with a selected class member. By doing so, these students adjust and, in a sense, merge their self-regulating practices with one another. Not only do they independently develop customised strategies which enhance their own individual learning, but they also engage in a 'two-way' self-monitoring process. That is, as the student (i.e., respondent) shares resources with another student, the two of them have to monitor each other's progression in order to establish whether the said resources will be available for individual use.

In contrast, another respondent mentioned:

I think it's quite hard to work in a group sometimes, when you don't know the people as well. We haven't done much group work in psychology. We've done a couple of experiments, but I don't really class that as group work, because you do the experiment in a pair, but you write it up individually. You can't write it up in a pair because of like plagiarism and stuff. So, you know, it's not really “group work” we've done so far... but at college and stuff we did a lot of group work. [...] Personally, I prefer independent work, because I feel especially when you don't know the people, very often I feel like I end up doing most of the work, because I'm quite particular and I like to do things to a high standard, and I feel quite a lot of people don't have that work ethic. They just want to 'get it done' and go out or whatever. So, I just find it easier to do it on your own, and then you can have your ideas, maybe talk to people about them as well. But I find when you try and do things in groups ideas can get lost and it's hard to organise yourselves and people don't pull their weight.

This quote shows that group work may involve situations characterised by conflicting values of responsibility and self-regulation, which is also noted in the literature (Burdett, 2003). As Jane Burdett

explains it, while group work does appeal as an efficient way to teach when teacher workloads increase, it “is not always viewed positively, however, due to tensions that can arise as individuals meet to complete set tasks” (2003, p. 177). Comparing the three experiences, however, the last respondent had the least experience with group work, and this may imply that the way the group work was offered, was not within the zone of proximity for this said respondent. Whereas the other respondents’ prior knowledge was at the level where they were able to self-initiate learning experiences, this particular respondent (i.e., quoted last) was incapable to profit from the experience, that required skills such as trust (in the other’s work ethic), or leadership (in stimulating others to set the same high standards).

5 Discussion

Through the use of a case-study approach at a university in the North East of England, the purpose of this article has been to investigate the ways in which students may go about in their learning—especially as to gain further insights to help identify implications for higher education practice. While a rather unrepresentative sample based on very local conditions, it is interesting to note that the results of this study revealed a lot about the students’ own organisation of their learning progress. Alas, the students in question mentioned very little about the teaching (techniques) and how this worked for them. Based on what was said about the lectures, is that these were used as one source of information, a second source being the literature, a third, the additional information they sought themselves, and a fourth were the conversations and exchanges they had with others, which were primarily their peers. In this respect, the results were similar to those of Nuthall (2005) who also found in younger ages that it is not about how something is being taught, but what and how this aligns with student’s previous knowledge. For the participants in the current study, the information they received seemed to make enough sense overall, and if not, they seemed to be able to make sense of it together. What is more, thinking about the necessary three times of exposure to the full set of information, it is an interesting finding that using own notes and also finding more information themselves, were active ways of self-creating this repetition and to deepen their understandings. With respect to the teaching process, this implies that it may actually be a better idea to only provide power points after the lessons, in order to stimulate students who are not aware of this possibility.

This study was meant to answer the questions how students organise their learning and what may be considered barriers. Intrinsically, the most important barrier that was identified in this study was that students struggled with their own time-management. This appeared to be the most significant difference compared to the previous education they received. The students did mention ways through which they helped themselves meet the deadlines; yet it should be kept in mind that these were the students who volunteered in participating and can, therefore, also be the students who experienced sufficient time to do so. Also following the thoughts of Kuh (1993), encouraging students to spend their time studying, seems to be worthwhile. This is not necessarily spending more time but spending time in a timely manner. Time management requires self-regulation that takes place in Boekaerts’ (1999) model, on the level of the process, and the self. With respect to the level of the process, it is important that students learn to self-monitor if they have achieved learning to the level that they are prepared for the next step. For the teacher, this can mean providing more explicitly information about what knowledge and skills should be mastered before the next class in order to be able to (fully) profit from it. This will help students prepare themselves and make sure that the information will be in their zone of proximal development. With respect to the level of the self, this concerns sufficient interest, motivation, and self-efficacy to avoid procrastination. The teacher can foster this by being inspirational, establishing teacher-student bonds, and by increasing self-efficacy (Bryson, 2014; Ritchie, 2017). Whereas teachers in higher education are experts in content, it may be less obvious, but important to also focus on showing interest explicitly in students, providing meaningful learning experiences they can relate to, and by helping them see their improvements (Frymier and Houser, 2000; Ritchie, 2017).

While taking place long after the study was conducted, in reflection, we can see that the COVID-19 pandemic may have made this question even more relevant, especially as educational activities have seen an increase in distance learning. On the one hand, this means that students can be more flexible in their time schedules, for example by using recorded videos of the lecture. On the other hand, this also implies that it may be more difficult to feel a sense of belonging, especially for first year students who often do not yet have a strong social network in their educational institutes (Tice et al., 2021). Besides the already mentioned ways of fostering regulation of the self, some more concrete actions for teachers that have been mentioned in relation to online teachers, but apply to traditional education as well, are: to provide students with opportunities to ask questions before the lessons, so these can be better aligned, by being present before and after lessons for students who feel the need to talk and bond with their teacher, by providing shorter lectures, allowing for more discussion time and active student participation, and by splitting the group into smaller subgroups, allowing for more discussion between students (Tice et al., 2021). It has also been suggested that it can help students if the constructive alignment that is provided, is also explicitly explained to students, allowing them to understand how their learning activities are thought to help them in the final assessment (Tice et al., 2021). What is more, the current study revealed that on the one hand, students were able to profit from learning with peers, but on the other hand could feel group work was not efficient. As already noted, it may be that students should also be prepared for group work, making sure their experiences in this respect also fit their zone of proximal development. This could mean that the teacher needs to be more explicit in the skills needed for group work and to take smaller steps, allowing students to first learn how to organise group work, before it can be used as a learning tool.

6 Conclusion

In conclusion, this article explores how students organise their learning and identifies barriers they face in higher education. Although it is based on a small, rather unrepresentative sample of higher education in the UK, the case material provides new insights into the processes involved in the (self-directed) learning process. Whereas these results and fitted potential take-home messages for teachers seem relevant for all students, the reader is reminded of the limitations of the current study that were already addressed, that is: the study was carried out among voluntary students that represented a WEIRD population, and although from an ethnographic perspective, was limited by the fact that it relied on interviews carried out by the teacher. Future studies could focus on additional sources of information, including the students' self-talk during their learning. Furthermore, it would be important to study if the mentioned implications for teachers, if applied, would indeed be successful. As the educational setting has a rich context, ethnographic research seems to be a relevant way to approach this. An independent researcher may take a longer period of time being in the same classes that the students receive and having in-depth conversations with them to more fully understand how their learning process and learning activities are affected by the teacher's actions and behaviours. Moreover, it is recommended to try to include non-WEIRD populations in future studies to verify if there maybe are more obstacles related to socio-cultural factors.

7 Declarations

7.1 Study Limitations

One crucial study limitation is the fact that the self-selected interviewees are not representative of the UK student population (especially in terms of ethnic and/or socioeconomic background).

7.2 Funding Source

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

7.3 Competing Interests

The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

8 Human-Related Study

8.1 Ethical Approval

Ethical approval was obtained from the Durham Centre for Academic Development (DCAD) in the School of Education at Durham University (Durham, England). The procedures used in the initial study adhere to the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki (where applicable) and the Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association (i.e., the author being trained in anthropology).

8.2 Informed Consent

Verbal and written informed consent were obtained from all individual participants included in the study, including consent to publish. All participants have been anonymised. Additional informed consent was obtained from all individual participants for whom identifying information may be included in this article.

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