Concept: Relational dimension and the importance of self-determination theory

Brief overview of concept:

The relational dimension of self-regulation focuses around the potential of the individual to work towards their own learning goals, by using and developing of their own skills, whilst gaining support from interactions with others. This process involves building **effective networks of support** and developing **boundary crossing skills** (Wenger, 2000). Forming networks of support, such as **Personal Learning Networks** (Rutherford, 2019; see also this EAT-Erasmus Theory Guide to PLNs) and effective **Learning Communities** (Lenning and Ebbers, 1999; Lenning *et al.*, 2013) is key to this relational dimension. Managing the interaction with others, and the **shared regulation** involved in that interaction is key to success.

An important feature of the relational dimension is effective **self-determination** (see this EAT-Erasmus Theory Guide on self-determination theory). Self-determination focuses on the importance of personal motivations and psychological wellbeing. Part of this self-determination, however, is how one manages relationships with peers. Also, understanding the requirements of the task and being able to identify the information and strategies that are important to support one's own learning.

Relational skills enable the learner to balance the needs of their own learning with those of the group. This balance ensures that their voice is heard within the group setting, while not impeding the activity of the group as a whole, e.g. the ability to notice, to listen, to support, to lead, to build their own networks of support. This balance is of particular importance in team-based learning, and group-based assessments. Relational skills enable and support the learner's development of self-awareness of their own learning, and the impact of one's beliefs and values on learning.

An important element for relational dimension is **Metacognitive flexibility**, the potential to adapt approaches and learning methods to suit a changing situation. Metacognitive flexibility can be developed through taking on novel experiences and challenges, such as crossing into 'unlike groups', or by working in unfamiliar surroundings (e.g., disciplines, professional, cultural etc.) or with unfamiliar ideas. This process encourages the learner to think and act differently (Zhang, 2013). Therefore, in developing self-regulatory capacity, what is important is not the number of groups to which the learner belongs, but their variety and the degree of challenge they represent. This variety enables the learner to relate the experiences of others to their own experiences, and adapt accordingly.

Considering the relational dimension is highly important when addressing assessment design. Even in individualised assessments, the student will need to navigate the guidance received from others (the assessment setter, educators, peers, online resources) to their own interpretations of the assessment requirements. The student will need to compare that external information with their own perceptions and ideas, and decide for themselves which is most substantive or important. Consistency, and the opportunity to discuss the assessment in

an informed and supported environment is important here. Subdimensions of EAT, such as AL1 (understanding what 'good' looks like) and AF1 (meaningful feedback), highlight the importance of clarity and discussion in this regard. Ensuring that the guidance received from others aligns with the perceptions the student has themselves is important.

Making sure that the student understands their role and responsibilities is also important (EAT sub-dimension AL3; see this online module on AL3 for more detail). Understanding where the responsibilities of the student as a learner end, and the responsibilities of the educator begin (and which of those overlap with each other) helps the student negotiate the balancing demands of the others around them. Figure 1, below, summarises **different types of support** that educators typically offer to students in assessment, and the benefits (pink) and problems (blue) associated with each.
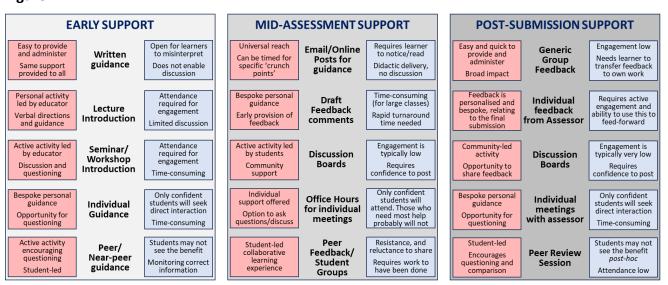
Figure 1

EARLY SUPPORT		
Easy to provide and administer / Same support provided to all	**Written guidance**	Open for learners to misinterpret / Does not enable discussion
Personal activity led by educator / Verbal directions and guidance	**Lecture Introduction**	Attendance required for engagement / Limited discussion
Active activity led by educator / Discussion and questioning	**Seminar/ Workshop Introduction**	Attendance required for engagement / Time-consuming
Bespoke personal guidance / Opportunity for questioning	**Individual Guidance**	Only confident students will seek direct interaction / Time-consuming
Active activity encouraging questioning / Student-led	**Peer/ Near-peer guidance**	Students may not see the benefit / Monitoring correct information

MID-ASSESSMENT SUPPORT		
Universal reach / Can be timed for specific 'crunch points'	**Email/Online Posts for guidance**	Requires learner to notice/read / Didactic delivery, no discussion
Bespoke personal guidance / Early provision of feedback	**Draft Feedback comments**	Time-consuming (for large classes) / Rapid turnaround time needed
Active activity led by students / Community support	**Discussion Boards**	Engagement is typically low / Requires confidence to post
Individual support offered / Option to ask questions/discuss	**Office Hours for individual meetings**	Only confident students will attend. Those who need most help probably will not
Student-led collaborative learning experience	**Peer Feedback/ Student Groups**	Resistance, and reluctance to share / Requires work to have been done

POST-SUBMISSION SUPPORT		
Easy and quick to provide and administer / Broad impact	**Generic Group Feedback**	Engagement low / Needs learner to transfer feedback to own work
Feedback is personalised and bespoke, relating to the final submission	**Individual feedback from Assessor**	Requires active engagement and ability to use this to feed-forward
Community-led activity / Opportunity to share feedback	**Discussion Boards**	Engagement is typically very low / Requires confidence to post
Bespoke personal guidance / Opportunity for questioning	**Individual meetings with assessor**	Only confident students will seek direct interaction / Time-consuming
Student-led / Encourages questioning and comparison	**Peer Review Session**	Students may not see the benefit *post-hoc* / Attendance low

Figure 1 - **Support offered to students in assessment.** There are various approaches that can be adopted to support students at either the start, during or at the end of an assessment. This diagram highlights some of these, and suggests potential benefits (in pink) or challenges (in blue) for each.

An example of the importance of the relational dimension in feedback is provided by the autoethnographic study of Farrell et al. (2016), in which the researchers found that goal-oriented discussions relating to feedback enhanced the feedback process, and that the interaction between the student end the educator was crucial to that development. As a result, the understanding of the boundaries of that relationship enabled both the educator and the student to gain positive experiences from the feedback.

EAT highlights the importance of empowering dialogue in feedback and the provision of timely/meaningful feedback in enhancing the self-regulation of the student. The relational element of this is fundamental, as the student needs to navigate guidance from more-experienced others and peers, as well as insights gleaned themselves from reviewing their work.

EAT also guides us to consider the active involvement of students in both understanding the parameters of an assessment, and in the review and quality enhancement of it (AD4). These require a clear understanding of the relational factors involved in these processes.

Group work assignments

One of the most substantial impacts of the relational dimension of self-regulation is in the management of group-based learning and assessment activities. Group-based assessments in particular are often disliked by students, due to the reliance on the work of others for a grade, and perceived inequalities in the work undertaken by members of the group, and the contributions of those members to the final outcome. Understanding the relational factors involved in groupwork is fundamental to these assignments. As discussed in this EAT-Erasmus Application Summary, a key to effective group-based assessments is managing the interpersonal elements of the group. Supporting students in the development of their relational skills and understandings is essential to empower the students to manage interpersonal issues, and solve problems with group dynamics and contributions, as they arise.

References

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