

## COMPLEXITIES IN STUDENT LEARNING: RESPONDING TO CONTEXTUAL DILEMMAS IN AN UNDERGRADUATE COURSE

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### Introduction

The purpose of this study is to discuss student's collective responses to the contextual dilemmas in an undergraduate course and the effects of such actions on students' learning. The specific objectives of this study are [;] to understand the nature of dilemmas faced by the students during their undergraduate course; to identify the collective actions of the students in response to the dilemmas faced by them and then to discuss the effects of those actions on their learning.

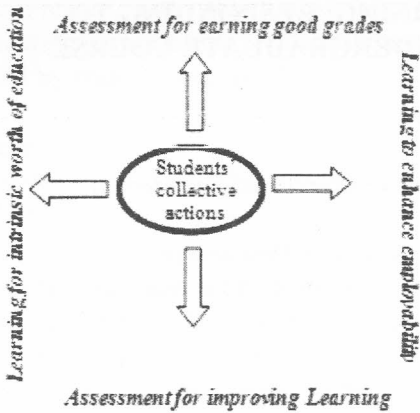
### Methods

This paper is based on a part of the data collected in a longitudinal qualitative study over a 3-4 year time period. In this study I have focused first on a group of students following a special degree course in psychology in a Sri Lankan university and collected data using semi-structured interviews with 15 students at different time intervals and four lecturers, then on reflective accounts written by the students and the lecturers, and finally on classroom observations. All interviews were recorded on audio tapes and later transcribed verbatim. Constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) is used for the analysis.

### Results and Discussion

It has emerged in the analysis that the students are affected by the dilemmas arising from their collective purpose and also from the institutional practices of assessment. The dilemma arising from the collective purpose was in the form of learning to enhance employability vs. learning for intrinsic worth of education. The dilemma arising from the institutional practices of assessment was in the form of assessment for earning good grades vs. assessment for improving learning.

The competing values embedded in the assessment practices as well as the collective purpose of the undergraduate course depicted in Fig. 1 pull the students in two different directions. Students' collective actions tend to be geared towards the polars they valued and found affordances in the context. When they realised that the assessment system provides affordances to earn a good degree by achieving better grades in examinations they have concentrated more on examinations than other things. Similarly, when they faced the problem of the lack of concern for developing 'practical skills' in the course the students collectively have looked for strategies to enhance their employability.



**Fig. 1: The dilemmas arising from collective purpose & assessment practices**

The students responded to these dilemmas in interesting ways. They have used strategies of maximizing grades (Becker et al, 1968; Gibbs, 2006) competition (Crooks, 1988) and mimicking mastery or faking good (Gibbs, 2006) in response to the dilemma in assessment practices. The assessment practices had a backwash effect on educational practice as reported in previous studies (Havnes, 2004). Moreover, the competitive assessment structure of the undergraduate course promoted values and outcomes contrary to the values envisaged in policy documents and academic literature. However, the collective actions of students in relation to the need to enhance employability had a more positive impact on their learning. Two dominant responses in relation to the need to enhance employability were: [;] 1. enrolling in vocational and other courses conducted by the university and outside organizations; 2. using opportunities in the learning context

to enhance 'practical skills'. Students' active involvement in using opportunities in the context to develop their 'practical skills' has helped them to achieve positive outcomes. Finally, the students reported that they were able to increase their action possibilities, transform their identities and to improve their capacities to manage interpersonal relationships.

**Conclusion**

Student learning in undergraduate education is a dialectical change process which is mediated by teaching, curriculum and assessment practices and social relationships. When the students are provided with opportunities to interact with different people in different settings and to use new tools of learning such as group discussions, negotiations, decision making, attempting to teach peers in classrooms, engaging in self and collective reflections they were able to achieve higher order learning.

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