

Academic Self-Handicapping Strategies of Students in a Community College: A Phenomenological Study

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Students' level of engagement is determined by factors such as level of motivation, guidance, learning environment, and maturity. Unengaged students are typically poor performing, which can be manifested through practicing academic self-handicapping strategies. Self-handicapping is the process of making excuses and justifications in failing or potentially failing to perform what is expected to an individual to preserve self-image (Jones & Berglas, 1978). In this paper, the academic self-handicapping strategies of college students were investigated. The study specifically looked at the motivation for resorting to such strategies and their implications to academic performance. In this phenomenological study, a focus group discussion was conducted to 15 student-participants in a local college in Angeles City, Philippines. It was found out that the student-participants engaged to academic self-handicapping strategies both during the face-to-face and the distance learning modalities. Both teaching and learning modalities have common motivations in resorting to academic self-handicapping. Generally, the participants practiced academic self-handicapping to preserve their image although they were aware that their academic performance and standing were compromised. Another interesting result is that the participants were able to realize that amidst the immediate relief that they had felt after resorting to self-handicapping, they had to compensate. Maintaining open communication, continuous monitoring of the students, and developing students' self-accountability towards learning are recommended to address the negative effects of resorting to academic self-handicapping.

Keywords: academic self-handicapping, college students, learning

Introduction

The educational system basically aims to exhibit changes in students' cognitive faculty, behavior, and character. This involves the process of teaching and learning. Typically, the academic success of students is associated to the competence and effectiveness of teachers. This is relatively true. Teachers' primary goal is the holistic development of students. This targets the mind development, skills development, and values formation of students to become able, productive, and good citizens of the society. Nonetheless, it is also noteworthy that academic success can also be attributed to student-related factors. Students' attitude and behavior towards academic undertakings may either make or break their success.

One practice that students resort to is self-handicapping. Jones and Berglas (1978) defined self-handicapping as the process of making excuses and justifications in failing or potentially failing to perform what is expected to an individual to preserve self-image. This process does not categorically qualify that an individual is incapable of doing a certain task but provides a mere explanation of resorting to explaining either true or make-believe reasons. In schools, this can be manifested from students in regard to their academic tasks; thus, academic self-handicapping was coined. Riggs (1992) asserted that students who academically self-

handicap do not really fear failure because they are aware that failure may highly occur. This was proven by Gadbois and Strugeon (2011) who noted that students with high tendency to self-handicap perform poorly in their academic tasks. What they are concerned about is their image. Their justified non-conformance maintains their standing with utmost considerations of the teacher. Students look at actual inability as a shameful reason rather than creating scenarios.

Urduan and Midgley (2001) revealed that there are two major elements in doing academic self-handicapping, namely: 1) purpose and 2) prior effort to manipulate others. It was also found out in their study that others are highly possible to gradually develop negative images towards students who do self-handicapping. In addition, it was concluded that students who usually self-handicapped were low achiever but maintained their regard about school. Academic self-handicapping proposes no significant effect to academic achievement (Schwinger, Lemmer, Wirthwein, & Steinmayr, 2014). Pulford, Johnson, and Awaida (2005) mentioned that students with high self-esteem and self-efficacy do not likely resort to self-handicapping. On the other hand, Sahnc (2011) revealed that anxiety, depression, and stress highly contribute to students doing self-handicapping. Specific strategies may vary according to students. It can be in a form of procrastination, effort withdrawal, and emotional distress.

This paper aimed to investigate the academic self-handicapping strategies of students in a community college. It also looked into the reasons why students resort to academic self-handicapping. It furthered studied the implications of such activities to the academic performance of the students.

Methodology

This qualitative study utilized a phenomenological research design. It primarily investigated the academic self-handicapping strategies of students in a community college. Fifteen students coming from different institutes participated. Five students came from every institute (Institute of Education, Arts and Sciences, Institute of Business and Management, and Institute of Computing Studies and Library Information System). The participants underwent a focus group discussion via a videoconferencing platform. There was one focus group discussion for every institute. The recordings were transcribed. Codes and themes were formed afterwards.

Results and Discussion

Academic self-handicapping strategies

The participants in the study mentioned a number of self-handicapping strategies that they had in relation to justifying their failure to accomplish academic-related tasks. The most common self-handicapping strategy during the face-to-face and the online learning modalities was Internet problem. During pre-pandemic classes, students also resorted to the following excuses for not accomplishing academic tasks: (1) forgetting to bring their works because they were rushing to go to school, (2) creating stories of emergency situations at home or at work which includes family matters to personal errands, and (3) creating stories of illness.

Jones and Berglas (1978) initially described self-handicapping as making excuses and justifications in inability or potentially failing to perform what is expected to an individual to preserve self-image. This description is manifested in the responses of the respondents. The

answers elicited are vivid justifications made by the students to preserve their image before their teachers. It is also revealed that the reasons created by the students intended to manipulate the response and feedback of their teachers in regard to their inability to achieve the objectives of the teacher.

Reasons for doing academic self-handicapping strategies

Urduan and Midgley (2001) proposed two major elements in doing academic self-handicapping, namely: 1) purpose and 2) prior effort to manipulate others. These two can be observed in the responses of the respondents as to what their reasons are in resorting to academic self-handicapping strategies. The participants used academic self-handicapping strategies as a remedy when they failed to accomplish their academic tasks because of prioritizing other activities, which were most likely unrelated to academics. Sometimes they practiced academic self-handicapping simply because they were too lazy to do their tasks. Insufficient time was also a reason for them. When students are preoccupied, they tend to compromise some of their tasks. Interestingly, it is also revealed that students resorted to academic self-handicapping and passive performance in school when they were uninterested in the class and to the teacher. If teachers are aware of this, academic self-handicapping can be addressed by giving guidance and establishing motivating learning environment. Noble, Roberts, and Sawyer (2006) asserted that students perform well when they receive guidance either from their families or teachers. This can be observed in students' attitude towards their studies and habits.

Implications of academic self-handicapping to the academic performance of students

As per the implications of academic self-handicapping to the academic performance of students, it is revealed that negative effects were experienced. However, realization comes at the end. Due to effective way to preserve one's image, students tend to use academic self-handicapping to justify their negligence. Thus, they continue disregarding deadlines for submissions and the quality of their outputs. They are also aware that the quality of their learning is compromised whenever they resort to academic self-handicapping. They usually get low grades as a result of neglecting their tasks. Students also realized after a while of doing academic self-handicapping strategies that they are exhibiting a bad image towards their teachers. And this affects the students in connection to their communication with their teachers. However, students came to realize that they need to compensate their missed tasks that greatly affected their academic performance.

Conclusion

The following were formulated based on the results of the study:

- College students resort to academic self-handicapping strategies to preserve their image;
- In the midst of the pandemic where education has been redefined by the use of ICT, students use ICT-related issues as academic self-handicapping strategy;

- Though there is a sort of immediate and temporary relief, the use of academic self-handicapping strategies among college students negatively impact their academic performance; and
- College students need to compensate for their compromised academic tasks to redeem the expected attitude and behavior towards their academics.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and the conclusions, the following are the recommendations of the study:

- Monitor accomplishment of tasks of the students;
- Monitor the holistic well-being of the students;
- Maintain open communication with the students;
- Provide flexible arrangements with regard to academic tasks; and
- Develop self-accountability towards learning among the students.

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