Linking counter-knowledge to goal orientation through an unlearning context — A study from a Spanish University

CrossMark

Juan-Gabriel Cegarra-Navarro [a], Pedro Soto-Acosta [b,*], Eva Martinez-Caro [a]

[a] Department of Business Management, Technical University of Cartagena, Spain
[b] Department of Management & Finance, University of Murcia, Spain

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The performance of higher education students may be explained by characteristics of both the academic and social environment in the classroom. The environments provided by classrooms to facilitate learning among students can be seen as useful vehicles for creating shared narratives to transfer gossip, lies, exaggeration and partial truths (i.e. counter-knowledge). This paper focuses on unlearning as a context to counteract the problem of counter-knowledge. The relationships between an unlearning context and counter-knowledge are analysed by using an empirical study of 210 undergraduate students in order to identify whether there is a significant impact on student's goal orientation by unlearning. Our results confirm that counter-knowledge is a variable that, when controlled, has the effect of strengthening the relationship between unlearning and student's goal orientation. However, when left uncontrolled, the relationship between unlearning and student's goal orientation is weaker than it otherwise would be.

© 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

De la Fuente (2004) refers to academic goals as motives of an academic nature that students use to guide their classroom behaviour. There are many factors other than instruction that can influence how students actually perform. For example, "counter-knowledge" often masquerades scientific knowledge, even though it can be proved to be untrue in reference to known facts and/or shown to lack appropriate supporting evidence. Indeed, the very lack of supporting evidence is sometimes used to create a shared non-reliable truth of a particular statement — for example the statement that a cure for cancer exists (Thompson, 2008).

Counter-knowledge is created when individuals create inappropriate or incorrect interpretations of certain events or sequences of facts. Rumours, gossip, unsupported explanations and justifications, as well as inappropriate or false beliefs are just several examples that illustrate students' capacity to create and share counter-knowledge in the classroom (Harvey & Lusch, 1999). However, as acknowledged in previous literature, counter-knowledge, generated via rumour, gossip, exaggeration and the acceptance of partial truths, is not always necessarily bad (Baumeister, Zhang, & Vohs, 2004, Van der Veeken, 2014) and, thus, it may be controlled and handled. For example, Baumeister et al. (2004) and Banerjee, Chandrasekhar, and Jackson (2014) argue that gossip is useful for conveying information to others, for social influence and for

entertainment. Such anecdotes may also be useful to explain how culture and society operate (Dunbar, 1996; Fox, 2001).

The considerations above imply that counter-knowledge may lead students to develop a world-view that, although it is at most partially true, is useful, since it is an important form of social communication which serves to bond people together (Baumeister et al., 2004). Nonetheless, in order to get the most from counter-knowledge, it is necessary to create or promote an active unlearning context to handle and critically examine counter-knowledge.

The relevant contribution of the unlearning context is its ability to prepare the ground for the process of correcting incorrect assumptions necessary to improve students' relationships with teachers' and therefore potentially also improves student performance (Cianciolo et al., 2006). Developing an unlearning context in higher education institutions may increase students' performance, not only by questioning previous tacit knowledge or statements (Matthew & Sternberg, 2009), but also by creating a learning environment that motivates students to participate. In turn, this may help the students to achieve academic goals.

In an attempt to cover the above-mentioned research gaps and based on previous literature, this paper develops a research model to analyse several relationships between counter-knowledge, an unlearning context and students' goal orientations (SGO) in higher education. More specifically, the research questions that motivated this work are as follows: 1) "How does the unlearning context affect SGO?"; 2) "Can an unlearning context enhance SGO?"; 3) "Is there a negative relationship between counter-knowledge and SGO?"; and 4) "How does counter-knowledge affect SGO in the presence of an unlearning context?". The next section describes in detail the theoretical

* Corresponding author at: University of Murcia, Department of Management & Finance, Campus de Espinardo, 30100 Murcia, Spain.
E-mail address: psoto@um.es (P. Soto-Acosta).