ENHANCING LEARNER ENGAGEMENT THROUGH AUTHENTIC LEARNING TASKS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract - Although learners active participation plays an important role in improving the quality of higher education, traditional lecture based instruction still fails to adequately support students genuine engagement. The purpose of this study is to examine how authentic learning tasks influence students engagement, activity, and responsibility in the learning process, based on empirical data from students of the economics and management program at the Department of economics and management of the Mongolian national defense university.

The study employed real world cases, project based tasks, and authentic problem-solving assignments implemented in undergraduate level university courses, and evaluated student engagement across behavioral, psychological, and cognitive dimensions. Research data were collected through questionnaires, learning activity data, and analysis of student work, and were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative research methods.

The research findings indicate that authentic learning tasks significantly increase students engagement in coursework, their inclination toward independent learning, and their ability to take responsibility when addressing real world problems. This study is distinctive in that it offers evidence based recommendations aimed at effectively planning and implementing authentic learning in higher education.

Keywords - Learner Engagement**,** Authentic Learning Tasks, Higher Education Pedagogy, Active And Experiential Learning, Student-Centered Instruction

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, issues such as the quality of higher education, graduates alignment with labor market needs, and students active participation have attracted particular attention. Mongolia's higher education policy documents have repeatedly emphasized the need to develop learner centered, outcome based, and practice oriented education. However, there is ongoing criticism that in university teaching practice, traditional lecture based, knowledge transmission approaches still predominate, which fail to sufficiently support students genuine participation, engagement, and sense of responsibility.

Studies conducted by Mongolian researchers on the quality of higher education teaching and student engagement indicate that students often perceive learning as a process of passively receiving information, and that opportunities for solving real world problems, developing critical thinking, and engaging in independent learning are limited. Additionally, employers have commonly concluded that while graduates theoretical knowledge is relatively sufficient, their ability to solve problems in real life situations, work in teams, and make decisions is weak. This indicates an urgent need to update the content and methodology of higher education curricula.

One possible way to address these issues is through an authentic learning approach. Authentic learning is a pedagogical approach that aims to engage learners as active participants by guiding them to solve real life, complex, open ended problems. In the context of Mongolian higher education, learning experiences that use real world cases, project based assignments, and authentic data have increased in recent years however, empirical studies that systematically examine their impact on student engagement remain relatively scarce.

Therefore, this study aims to examine how the implementation of authentic learning tasks in higher education affects students class participation, as well as their psychological and cognitive engagement in the learning process. The results of the study will have both theoretical and practical significance for renewing teaching methodologies and effectively implementing learner centered education in Mongolian universities.

II. THE CONCEPT AND ESSENCE OF AUTHENTIC LEARNING

The main trend in higher education reform is shifting from merely providing students with theoretical knowledge to equipping them with competencies that allow them to apply that knowledge in real life

situations. Authentic learning involves creating opportunities for learners to confront real world problems and learn by solving them, representing an educational approach focused on genuine learning experiences.

In the 2023 revised edition of Mongolia's 'General Education Law,' the spirit of the reform emphasizes developing learners into citizens who are creative, have critical thinking, and are capable of independent learning. In achieving this objective, a authentic learning methodology plays an important role. This directly aligns with the idea of 'Competency-based education' reflected in the 'Vision 2050' policy document. The more the training is based on the student's own active engagement and is close to real life, the more knowledge is transformed into skills.

Authentic learning is a teaching approach that focuses on actively engaging students in the process of learning by solving real life, open ended problems with multiple solutions. This approach emphasizes enabling students to construct meaning themselves and apply knowledge in real world contexts, rather than simply transmitting knowledge in a ready made form.

Characteristics of authentic learning:

The main tool for increasing student engagement is Authentic Tasks. Authentic tasks have the following characteristics. These include:

Real-world relevance: The task is not abstract; it is based on real situations that could occur in a professional field.

Ill-defined challenges: The task does not have a single “correct” answer and requires students to reflect and explore solutions from multiple perspectives.

Collaboration and Reflection: Students work in teams and have the opportunity to analyze and evaluate their own performance.

In Mongolian educational-pedagogical research, the training assignment is defined as a 'knowledge-creating process,' and the assignment being able to attract the student's interest and having practical significance is considered the foundation for arousing the motivation to learn.

Student engagement and its metrics

Theoretically, genuine learning is considered capable of supporting all dimensions of student engagement simultaneously. A task based on real world problems actively involves students in the lesson and increases behavioral engagement. At the same time, a problem connected to real life enhances interest in learning and intrinsic motivation, supporting psychological engagement.

Student engagement is not only the issue of attending class or presence. Student engagement is considered in the following three dimensions:

Behavioral engagement: Following rules, responding actively, completing assignments.

Emotional engagement: Relationships with teachers and classmates, enjoying the class, understanding its value.

Cognitive engagement: Motivation to complete challenging tasks, self regulation, using deep learning strategies.

Authentic tasks have an advantage over traditional lecture methods because they activate these three types of engagement simultaneously.

Authentic tasks stimulate cognitive engagement by requiring students to deeply understand problems, analyze them from multiple perspectives, and defend their solutions with justification. In the context of higher education in Mongolia, this type of assignment is also critically important for fostering students independent learning and cultivating a culture of responsibility.

Therefore, implementing the actual training in alignment with higher education course design, assessment, and teaching methodology can be considered an approach that is theoretically grounded and practically significant for increasing student engagement.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was organized with the aim of empirically determining how implementing authentic tasks in the higher education learning environment affects student engagement. Within the scope of the study, authentic tasks were implemented on a trial basis for a certain period in courses of universities in the field of economics and management, and subsequently, a survey was conducted with a total of 101 students, and the collected data were processed using the SPSS statistical program.

In the experiment, assignments based on real cases, projects, and practice were introduced into the teaching process, and students were actively involved in analyzing real life problems, making decisions in teams, and defending and reporting their results. After the experiment, in order to determine the level of students participation in learning, a survey was conducted using a questionnaire structured to cover behavioral, psychological, and cognitive engagement.

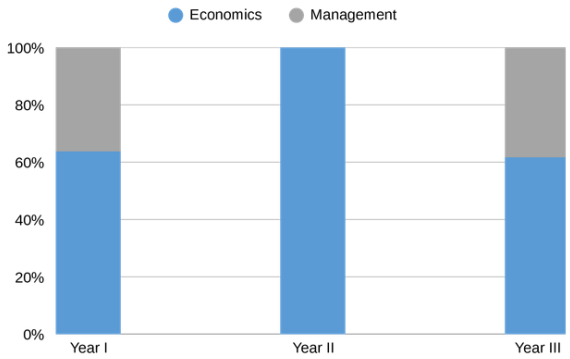
The collected data were prepared for statistical processing by coding the survey responses, entering them into the SPSS program, and checking the reliability of the measurements using Cronbach’s Alpha coefficient. After this, in order to determine the level of student engagement, frequency and descriptive statistical analyses were conducted, and in order to identify the relationship between the actual learning task and student engagement, correlation analysis was performed.

Authentic task design

The authentic tasks used in the study were developed based on the following key criteria:

Be based on real life issues

Creating conditions similar to a professional environment
Students worked in teams and were tasked with decision making, reporting, and presenting.
There is no single "correct" answer required, but analysis and reasoning are emphasized.
After each task, students reflected on their learning process and participation.
Picture 1. Distribution of study participants by course and professional field



The total number of research participants was 101, comprising students from the 2nd to 4th years. Most of the students were enrolled in economics programs, which reflects a group well suited to the systematic implementation of authentic tasks.

Table 1. Reliability statistics of learner engagement scale

№	Dimensions	Number of questions / question number	Cronbach's Alpha
1	Behavioral engagement	4	0.82
2	Psychological engagement	4	0.79
3	Cognitive engagement	3	0.85
Total queries		**11**	**0.91**

Table 4

A Cronbach's Alpha coefficient above 0.7 indicates that the questionnaire used in the study is an internally consistent and reliable measure.

№	Dimensionsof Participation	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	Behavioral engagement	3.89	0.61
2	Psychological engagement	4.02	0.58
3	Cognitive engagement	4.15	0.53

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of learner engagement

The majority of the study participants demonstrated above average levels of engagement in lessons based on authentic tasks. In particular, the fact that cognitive engagement had the highest mean indicates that real world problem solving tasks deepen the learning process.

The relationship between the quality assessment of authentic learning tasks and learners engagement was examined using correlation analysis.

The analysis results showed a positive and statistically significant relationship at $p < 0.05$ between authentic tasks and behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement.

This empirically demonstrates that real cases, projects, and practical assignments increase students active participation and engage them more deeply in the learning process.

The following conclusions can be drawn from the research results. These include:

- Authentic tasks increase all dimensions of student engagement.
- Within the Economics and Management program, using real cases and projects improves the connection between theory and practice.

- Students enthusiasm, interest, and deep learning tendencies are more evident during real world assignments.

IV. CONCLUSION

Ensuring the active participation of students in improving the quality of higher education and increasing graduates competitiveness in the labor market has become a foremost requirement. Traditional lecture based instruction puts students in a passive role as information receivers, whereas authentic tasks have been proven by this research to be an effective methodology to compensate for this shortcoming.

The actual learning assignment simultaneously enhances all dimensions of student engagement behavioral, emotional, and cognitive in a statistically significant way. Data from 101 students who participated in the study show that their average level of engagement across all dimensions was above average, ranging from 3.89 to 4.15.

The highest result from the research was cognitive engagement, with a mean of 4.15. This indicates that tasks involving solving real world problems and exploring multiple solution options help students not only memorize information but also develop the

ability to analyze problems deeply, think critically, and justify their own solutions.

Within the framework of the Economics and Management program, using real cases, projects, and practical data helps students understand how to apply the theoretical knowledge they have acquired in a professional environment, and increases their motivation to learn. This fully aligns with the competency based education philosophy reflected in Mongolia's ‘general education law’ and 'Vision 2050'. Ultimately, systematically introducing authentic assignments with real life content, ambiguity, and requiring collaboration into higher education institutions curricula will be the foundation for taking the quality of education to a new level and preparing graduates who meet the demands of the labor market.

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