

Book Review

Entwistle, N. (2018). *Student Learning and Academic Understanding: A Research Perspective with Implications for Teaching*. Academic Press.

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Research on Student Approaches to Learning (SAL) in higher education has led to the development of some of the most widely known and misunderstood contributions to our knowledge about student learning in higher education. These misunderstandings are best illustrated by the way in which a way of understanding students' intentions in particular acts of learning (deep and surface approaches to learning) have morphed into categories related to types of learning (deep and surface learning) and types of learners (deep and surface learners). This important book explains how and why SAL developed in a thoughtful and accessible way that allows the reader to understand the history and potential of this area of research.

The book sets out the accumulated wisdom of one of the leading SAL researchers who has spent over 40 years engaging with and developing this field of research. The book is written in a highly engaging manner and is shaped by a passionate commitment to enable others to understand and to continue to develop this work. Noel Entwistle takes the reader through his 'line of research' and how this led to a focus on how students develop academic understanding. He provides an introduction to a way of thinking about teaching and learning in higher education, a map of the most significant ideas that underpin this way of thinking, and a manual for those who want to contribute to this body of research. The book addresses a gap in a field that is dominated by journal articles, which, due to their focus on making an original contribution to knowledge, lack a sense of how, and most importantly, why, questions have evolved over time. This means that this book will be invaluable for those who are becoming researchers in this field, whether through doing a doctorate or moving from other fields having become fascinated by questions about their teaching. It also will be incredibly useful to those more established in the field as well as higher education teachers.

The book is split into five parts with extensive appendices. Part One is made up of two chapters introducing the book's central project and the evolution of the conceptual underpinning of SAL. There is a helpful account of the context in which these ideas developed and how they formed in reaction to behaviourism and in conversation with other research including work on information processing and individual differences. Part Two is made up of four chapters that are focused on student learning and studying. These chapters provide a clear and important account of how an initial focus on academic performance proved unproductive and how the failure to find simple relations between student characteristics and academic performance led to a focus on examining learning from the perspective of students and a consideration of students' everyday approaches to studying. There is a very helpful discussion of ways of measuring these approaches to learning and studying.

Part Three is made up of three chapters that examine the nature of academic understanding, how this is experienced by students and how it is shaped by disciplinary ways of thinking. These chapters give a rich sense of how teaching and learning are never generic but are shaped by both who the students are and the subject matter that they are learning. This leads onto Part Four of the book which examines how universities and teaching-learning environments shape students' academic understanding. Part Five is a single concluding chapter that provides an integrative overview of the book's argument. There are two important sets of appendices at the end of the book that are designed to assist those who want to take this research further. The first provides copies of some of

the inventories discussed in the book, further explanation of their development, and the full heuristic model of influences on student learning that underpins the book's argument. The second set of appendices is made up of six important pieces of writing (two by Entwistle and four by others) that play a key role in the book's argument but are very difficult to get hold of. This again demonstrates Noel Entwistle's deep commitment to do all he can to enable the reader to develop a rich understanding of the ideas underpinning his line of research.

The book has two main arguments. One is an argument about the substantive issues related to students' academic understanding; the second is a methodological argument about the issues that researchers face when studying academic understanding.

The substantive argument takes the form of a step-by-step explanation as to how students' academic understanding became the central focus of Entwistle's research. This began with the desire to accurately predict students' academic performance. However, it quickly became clear that there was no way of doing this without taking account of a range of factors including the academic subject that students were studying; who the students were and how they understood the world; their perceptions of their teaching and learning environment; how they understood the tasks they were engaged in; and their understanding of the ways in which their learning was to be assessed. Entwistle carefully and convincingly demonstrates the contextual nature of teaching and learning and argues, against experimental psychologists and those who proselytise the wonders of randomised control trials, that we need to understand students' everyday experiences of studying. If his thoughtful analysis was widely read and understood by institutional leaders and policy makers, it would finally end the nonsense of 'best practice', which is underpinned by the naïve assumption that we can unproblematically transfer effective teaching practices from one context to another. However, the slim chances of this happening are illustrated by Appendix B1, which is from a talk Noel Entwistle gave in 1973 and, nearly five decades on, provides a clear explanation of all of the problems currently faced by those who wish to use metrics to measure the quality of teaching and learning in higher education.

The methodological argument is equally important. This underlines the importance of understanding the approach and findings of previous research, the importance of taking a theoretical position in research, how this shapes what we will find, and the importance of drawing on a variety of sources and forms of data. A strong case is made for the virtues of combining quantitative data from surveys with qualitative data from interviews so that we have access to broad patterns but can also develop contextualised ways of understanding how students think about their own experiences. As a whole, this means that the book offers a deeply reflexive account of both the potential and limitations of research methods in SAL.

Overall, the book has many strengths. The most important of these is the clear history of SAL and an explanation of how and why this perspective has developed over time. Taking this account seriously is really important if we are to avoid continuously re-inventing the wheel every quarter of a century or so and are to be able to build more effectively a collective body of knowledge about students' learning in higher education. Given this, it is not surprising that the main limitation of the book reflects a limitation of SAL. This is the tendency to flatten the contexts that help to shape approaches to learning and teaching. Whilst Entwistle clearly recognises the way teaching and learning are shaped by factors such as national and institutional policies and social changes, there is no sense given of how this happens or of the different roles that are played by different factors. This plays out most problematically in relation to the academic subject that students are studying. When it is discussed in terms of students' understanding of the academic subject, it is presented as a rich, dynamic and three-dimensional knowledge object. Whereas, when it is discussed in terms of a wider

discipline, it is presented as a 'black box' that impacts on students everyday studying but the workings of which are not open to further analysis. It is important to be clear that this is because SAL simplifies the world in order to research it, as do all approaches to research. This means that in order to develop a richer understanding of these contexts would involve a different line of research than the one that Entwistle has done so much to develop and that these lines of research would offer a different, rather than a more complete, picture of students' everyday studying. This highlights the need to bring different lines of research into conversation with each other so that we can build our understanding of students' experiences of everyday learning. Entwistle's book provides a potential starting point for this conversation.

In conclusion, this is a thoughtful, scholarly and engaging book which offers the reader a wonderful introduction to and explanation of Entwistle's line of research and has the potential to provide the basis for a broader conversation about teaching and learning in higher education. It is a book that needs to be read, debated, and built-upon as a seminal text in the field.