Undergraduate Attitudes Towards Help-Seeking

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Introduction

Appropriate help-seeking is a necessary skill in becoming a successful self-regulated learner (Newman, 1994), however many students under-use or abuse the help facilities offered to them by interactive learning environments (ILEs) (Koedinger & Aleven, 2007). A variety of dispositional factors affect student help-seeking practices and social concerns are often under-explored in the context of individual ILEs. In our work, we focus on undergraduate students, because they may still struggle with social factors in their desire to build and maintain a positive social identity in the new and sometimes intimidating university context. This paper presents results from a survey study that provides foundational insights into the factors affecting student help-seeking practices in our target student population.

Nelson-Le Gall (1981) proposes a model of help-seeking in classroom contexts in which the student must (1) first become aware of a help need, (2) decide to seek help from an external source, (3) identify potential helpers, (4) implement strategies for engaging the helper, and (5) reflect upon the help-seeking attempt. Aleven et al (2003) adapt this model to ILEs, stopping short of examining the help-seeking process in collaborative ILEs. Of particular interest to our future work is step 2 (students' decisions to seek help) and step 4 (strategies for seeking help). We propose that student dispositions should impact whether and how students seek help, and explore this hypothesis in this survey.

Our future work examines how manipulating public threats to self-esteem might interact with student dispositions and private threats to self-esteem to affect their help-seeking. We will manipulate evaluation apprehension and public threats through a variety of means: social role of the tutor, social/technical presence of the tutor, relationship between the collaborators, and public/private help facilities. But first, we must understand if our potential students encounter difficulties seeking help, and if there are particular student dispositions or social situations that lend to more help-seeking.

Method

Participants include 26 participants (14 female, 12 male) with a mean age of 19.7 years (SD = 1.49) from a university in a small city, who completed a self-report questionnaire. In our questionnaire, the variables of interest include (1) student dispositions and (2) help-seeking strategies. Previous literature suggests that dispositions, including shyness, personality, gender, self-esteem, and achievement goals might impact help-seeking. Our self-report questionnaire uses a Shyness scale (Cheek, 1983), the short version of the Big Five Personality Index (Rammstedt & John, 2007) (openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, acceptance, and neuroticism), the one item self-esteem scale (Robins et al, 2001), and Midgley et al's (2000) PALS achievement goal questionnaire (mastery-oriented, performance avoidance-oriented, and performance approach-oriented).

Our help-seeking strategies outcome items come from Wolters et al (2003) and consist of measures for general intention to seek needed help, general intention to avoid needed help, perceived costs of help-seeking, perceived benefits of help-seeking, instrumental (autonomous) help-seeking goals, expedient (executive) help-seeking goals, seeking help from formal sources (e.g., teachers), seeking help from informal sources (e.g., peers), as well as perceived teacher support of questioning.

Results and Conclusions

As this is a questionnaire study, relationships between factors are correlational. One would generally predict higher self-esteem, mastery-orientation, and extraversion to be correlated with higher self-reports of positive help-seeking and to see dispositions such as performance-approach to be related to more negative outcomes such as expedient help-seeking. Basic statistical information on our items is included in Table 1, and we discuss correlations of interest below.

Personality indicators of openness as well as performance-approach achievement goals were not significantly related to any help-seeking attitudes. Also, attitudes toward seeking help from formal sources do not appear to be related to any measured dispositional attributes. We see that perceived costs and benefits of help are rather similar, with the costs being slightly more apparent to students than benefits. Surprisingly, seeking help from informal sources was reported with low scores, but when we look at the correlational results in Table 2, we see that students low in self-efficacy reported a greater preference for seeking help from peers, as well as students reporting low amounts of mastery-oriented goals and higher amounts of performance-avoidance.

Table 1: Basic statistics on our help-seeking survey items.

Item	Example	M	SD
Intention to Seek Help	If I needed help in this class I would ask someone for assistance	4.96	0.90
Intention to Avoid Help	If I didn't understand something in this class, I would guess rather than ask someone for assistance	3.23	0.93
Perceived Costs of Help	Getting help in this class would be an admission that I am just not smart enough to do the work on my own	4.22	0.92
Perceived Benefits of Help	Getting help in this class would make me a better student	3.95	1.20
Instrumental Help-Seeking	I would get help in this class to learn to solve problems…by myself	4.44	0.53
Executive Help-Seeking	The purpose of asking somebody for help in this class would be to succeed without having to work as hard	4.49	0.68
Help from Formal Sources	If I were to seek help in this class it would be from the teacher	4.71	1.25
Help from Informal Sources	If I were to seek help in this class, it would be from another student	2.60	1.16
Teacher Support of Question	The instructor tells students to interrupt her whenever they have a question	4.3	0.70

Our initial results show a spread of opinions about help-seeking. This suggests that some students do have obstacles when seeking help, so interventions to reduce social apprehension may help reduce help-avoidance. Furthermore, we see some expected connections between our measures of student dispositions and help-seeking outcomes, especially self-esteem, extraversion, and mastery-orientation. Results showing that mastery learning-oriented goals are negatively correlated with seeking help from informal sources are interesting because that suggests that learning-oriented students prefer not to ask for help from their peers. One possible explanation for this is that perhaps these students do not think their peers can help them sufficiently. Overall, we see support for varying opinions about help-seeking, and mostly correlations between greater confidence and positive help-seeking beliefs. This suggests that it may be more difficult to find relationships between less beneficial dispositions and help-seeking beliefs which may add complexity to future interventions.

Table 2: Correlations between help-seeking attitudes (rows) and dispositions (columns).

	Self esteem	Self-efficacy	Shyness	BFI-Cons	BFI-Extra	BFI-Accept	BFI-Neur	Mastery	Perf-Av
Seek Help	.48**		-.34*		0.48**		-.56**		-.41**
Avoid Help	-.47**	.35*		-.34*		-.44**		-.52**	
Costs	.57**				.55**		-.44**		-.41**
Benefits	.63**	-.53**			.61**	.43**	-.60**		
Instrumental			.37*					.47**	
Executive	.45**								
Formal Src									
Informal Src		-.41**						-.64**	.44**
Teacher Sprt	.50**				.41**				

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