

“Strained and Strange”: Second-Year University Students' Help-Seeking Strategies

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Abstract

Second-year university students often experience a disconnection with their learning and may feel unmotivated, lack confidence, and are unprepared for the higher expectations and complex concepts of their courses. Their disconnection with their learning can be addressed through deepening the social connections between other second-year students, and instructors providing encouragement to seek help in their learning when they need it. There is scant research that examines the peer-interactions between second-years and how their interactions influence their help-seeking behaviours. This article focuses on the interactions and help-seeking behaviours of 26 students from a major metropolitan Australian university in 2021. Results show that peer interaction is highly valued by students but not easily facilitated, and the relationship between students and their instructor is foundational for future help-seeking behaviours. Implications for practice are also presented.

Keywords: Help-seeking; self-regulated-learning; qualitative research; second-year students.

Introduction

There is little evidence about the help seeking behaviours of second-year university students. This cohort of learners are known to experience a disconnection with their learning (Birbeck et al., 2021) and feel unmotivated, lacking in confidence and unprepared for the higher expectations and more complex concepts of a second-year course (Kyndt et al., 2017; Virtue et al., 2017). This cohort feel a strong sense of belonging to their institution when they deepen their social engagement with peers and instructors (Webb & Cotton, 2019) and it is through their sense of belonging that students experience a positive association with their institution, and persistence in their learning. Students who feel respected and have meaningful interactions with their peers are more likely to achieve greater academic outcomes (Zepke, 2018) and seek help when they need it (Won et al., 2021).

¹ The research was conducted at Western Sydney University by the lead author, who is also a doctoral student at the University of South Australia.



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Compared to the first year, courses in the second year have more academic rigour and complexity and students are expected to be able to demonstrate a depth of knowledge, integrate complex concepts and be independent, self-regulated learners (Virtue et al., 2017). This phenomenon is reported as the “sophomore slump” and “second-year blues” (Capik & Shupp, 2021). Second-year students can be reluctant to seek help to avoid being seen as less competent by peers and instructors (Milsom, 2015) or are overconfident in their abilities and consider they do not need help, when in reality they do (Birbeck et al., 2021). When instructors intervene and provide explicit encouragement to seek help, second-year students are more open to seeking the help they need (Pitsick, 2018). The interactions second-year students have with their peers and with their instructors influence their help-seeking behaviours, however there is scant research that examines the interactions as part of a broader suite of self-regulated learning activities.

Literature Review

University students' academic achievement is shaped by their active participation in the learning process which occurs when they are independent in their learning, seeking assistance when required, and have the skills to plan, control and manage their learning (Broadbent & Poon, 2015). The strategies that learners employ to personally initiate and sustain their learning, behaviours and beliefs are referred to as “self-regulated learning” and are critical skills that learners need to be academically successful (Zimmerman, 2002). Self-regulated learning encompasses both skill and determination which learners need to develop so that they are able to apply effective strategies relevant to tasks when they become challenging (Greene, 2017).

The COVID-19 pandemic created difficult times for higher education students (Baker et al., 2022; Hodges et al., 2020). Students struggled to establish and maintain productive peer relationships necessary for collaboration (Conrad et al., 2022) which impacted their learning (Mutz et al., 2022). Self-efficacy declined as students grappled with the complexities of interacting with peers and their instructors under emergency remote teaching (ERT) conditions (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020). Instructors made efforts to quickly shift their on-campus teaching arrangements to online delivery with heavy reliance on synchronous and asynchronous technologies to interact with their students (Baker et al., 2022; Bakir & Phirangee, 2021; Hodges et al., 2020). These studies form a growing field of research about the impact of the pandemic on student learning. Notably, learnings from the pandemic contribute to understanding areas where students require more support working in the online space, away from campus (Bozkurt et al., 2022).

Learning online, whether it is in ERT contexts or not, requires learners to be independent in their learning and effective in seeking help. Broadbent and Howe (2023) examine the relationship between help-seeking behaviours of students studying online and their findings point to confidence, or self-efficacy, as critical to the strength of the relationship. Broadbent and Howe (2023) and Birbeck et al (2021) present arguments for how help-seeking behaviours can contribute to student self-regulated learning. In light of the link between academic performance and help-seeking (Broadbent & Howe, 2023), the latter could be insightful in elucidating the challenges that second-year students face when they engage with higher levels of complexity in subject content and instructors expect them to learn independently (Birbeck et al., 2021).

Students tend to seek help from their peers (Martín-Arbós et al., 2021) and this behaviour constitutes an intentional and subjective act that requires confidence and effort on behalf of a student (Karabenick & Berger, 2013). Confident students use communication skills such as teamwork to establish relationships (Leganés-Lavall & Pérez-Aldeguer, 2016) and are more willing to ask for help (Won et al., 2021). Prior research demonstrates the connection between peer interactions and help-seeking (Karabenick & Berger, 2013; Ryan et al., 2001; Shim et al., 2013). The challenges associated with help-seeking were heightened during ERT: learners found peer interactions challenging (Mutz et al., 2022), which led to the creation of quiet spaces and reduced levels of collaboration (Gonzalez et al., 2022). Some of these challenges took place during online classes, via Zoom, where video cameras were turned off (Almendingen et al., 2021; Gonzalez et al., 2022) limiting facial expressions and gestures that potentially reflected students' thoughts and emotions and are necessary for facilitating interaction (De Stefani & De Marco, 2019). Zoom classes have been reported as making learning more challenging (Castelli & Sarvary, 2021) and learners opted to use other technology. Additionally, using synchronous video technology requires learners to be self-regulated in their learning (Linnes et al., 2022) and participate in peer discussion to address gaps in understanding (Holzer et al., 2021).

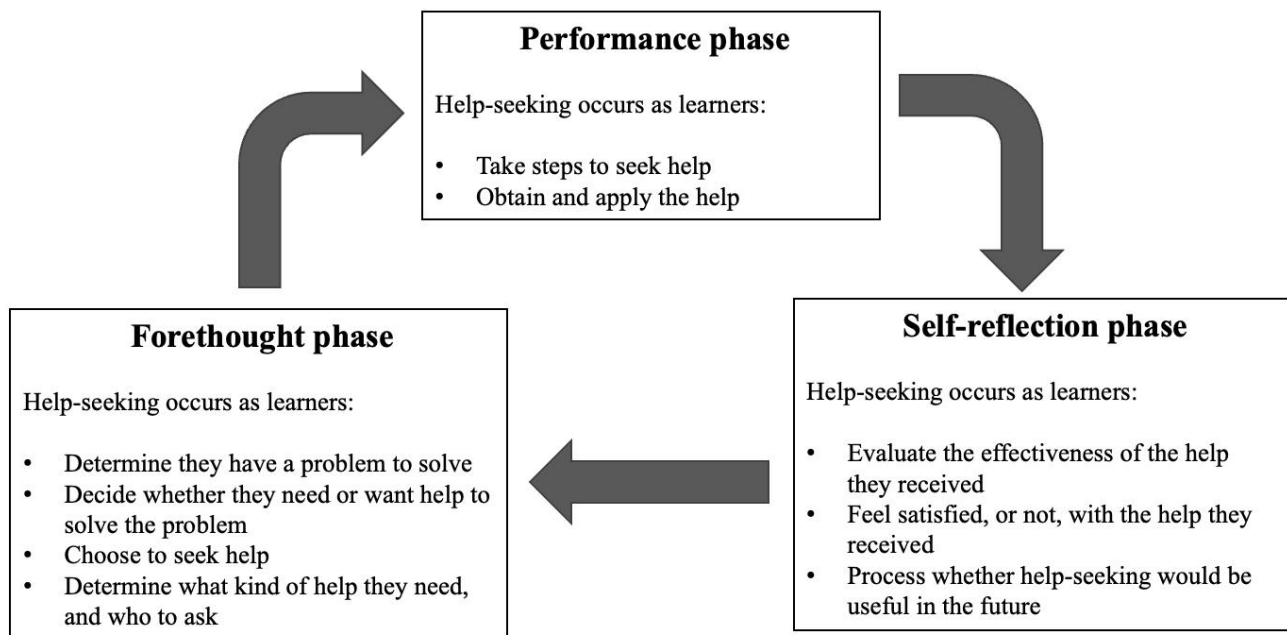
Where students struggled to connect and interact with peers in synchronous video classes, social media technology has been an effective tool for peer-interaction (Broadbent & Howe, 2023). Student use of social media technology has had a positive impact on peer-interactions and can create a learning community that extends widely across students' university experience (Barnes, 2017). For instance, students preferred the WhatsApp social media platform due to its low cost and stability over limited internet bandwidth to interact with peers (Mubaraq et al., 2023; Yu & Motlhabane, 2022). Although existing studies have reported that WhatsApp has been integrated into the course design and used by students for collaboration and filling knowledge gaps, they do not explore how social media technology was used by second-year students for peer interaction.

Theoretical Framework

Self-regulated learning provides a theoretical framework to examine second-year students' help-seeking behaviours. Self-regulated-learning is the process by which students control their behaviour, emotions, cognition and motivation (Pintrich, 2004; Zimmerman, 2002). As students control their behaviour, emotions, cognition, and motivation, they do so iteratively across three phases of forethought, performance, and self-reflection (Zimmerman, 2002). How students seek and apply help across these phases of self-regulation (Figure 1) varies due to students' self-efficacy, their awareness that they need help, and whether they have the motivation to seek and apply help where it benefits their needs (Karabenick & Berger, 2013).

Figure 1

Help-Seeking Behaviours (Karabenick & Berger, 2013) Across the Phases of Self-Regulation (Zimmerman, 2002)



Within the self-regulated learning phases, help-seeking is influenced by students' self-beliefs in the forethought phase as they assess if they need help, and they believe that the help they seek will be beneficial to them. For students with high levels of self-efficacy they seek help when they need it and confidently apply the help in addressing the problem at hand. Congruency occurs between the iterative phases of self-regulated learning theory (Zimmerman, 2002) and help-seeking strategies (Karabenick & Berger, 2013) as students need to become aware of their need for help, decide to ask for help, decide who or where to ask for help, action the help they receive and assess that this help was effective to their needs (Won et al., 2021). The deep connection between self-regulated-learning and help-seeking behaviours involves an iterative process of developing, applying and refining help-seeking skills. When students are able to blend their self-regulated learning skills and help-seeking behaviours there is a positive influence on their academic achievement (Martín-Arbós et al., 2021). However, it is not a simple dependency between self-regulated learning skills and help-seeking behaviours. For example, an Australian government-funded qualitative study on students' experience during COVID-19 revealed that although students had access to academic support, they experienced a lack of engagement and poor peer interaction making them feel isolated and unmotivated (Martin, 2020). This report does not explicitly focus on second-year students and he stresses the need for further research more broadly for all student levels. Research into the second-year student experience, particularly in Australia, is limited (Birbeck et al, 2021). There is scant research, even globally, about second-year students' interactions and their help-seeking behaviours which we argue are critical to students' motivation and their self-regulation. The current study goes some way to filling this gap in Australian studies that examine the second year experience with the focus on the interactions and help-seeking behaviours of second-year students.

Methods

Research Design

The overarching aim of our study was to examine the strategies that second-year students use to seek help by investigating the perceptions of their interactions with their peers and instructors. The following research questions were investigated:

RQ1: What are second-year university students' perceptions of interacting with their peers, and how does this affect their help-seeking behaviours?

RQ2: What are second-year university students' perceptions of the interactions they have with instructors and how does this affect their help-seeking behaviours?

The research design for this inquiry is qualitative research within a case study context and is an appropriate methodology to investigate questions of what, who, where, how and when (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Case studies are bound by time and activity (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) and investigate “a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context” (Yin, 2003, p.13). The central line of inquiry presented in this paper is based on an interpretist or constructivist world view where meaning is constructed from a complexity of perspectives generated from participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Takahashi & Araujo, 2019). The specific contexts in which participants live and study shape their perspectives and the researcher takes an inductive inquiry approach to generate meaning from the data collected (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Interpretist approaches in case study research use interviews as a dominant data collection method (Takahashi & Araujo, 2019).

Participants

Study participants were second-year students (N=26) studying courses in business, nursing, social sciences, and psychology at a large metropolitan Australian university. The students volunteered to participate in the study as a follow-up to their involvement in a larger student survey. All students were learning in ERT conditions due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Of these 26 participants, 21 were female (80%), and 5 were male (20%). The age range of participants ranged from 19-49 ($M=29$, $SD=8.82$). The Mean Grade-Point-Average (GPA) was 5.38 with a SD of 0.93. Of the participants, 11 were from low socio-economic status backgrounds (42%) and 15 were from higher socio-economic status backgrounds (48%). More than half of participants lived at home in a familial context of parents, siblings or with generational family members (54%), and the remainder either lived on their own or identified as a parent living with their own family.

Instrument

Participants were interviewed using semi-structured interview questions based on the Self-Regulated Learning Interview Schedule (SRLIS) developed by Zimmerman and De Pons (1986). Participants were asked the following questions in their interviews:

- What are your goals?
- What are your plans to achieve your goals?
- What resources have you identified as needing to reach your goals?
- What do you do when you get stuck in a learning activity or task?
- In what way do you learn from your peers?
- In what way do you interact with your instructor?

The SRLIS (Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons, 1988) was used because it asks specific questions about the social interactions of students with their peers, and with their instructors within the overarching framework of self-regulated learning. Interviews were conducted via Zoom and recorded for transcription and participants were provided a copy of their transcribed interview to confirm for accuracy. The interviews were conducted in June 2021 prior to students' final examination period and at a time when students were more likely to be seeking help in the completion of course tasks and assessment. Ethics approval was obtained prior to the commencement of the study.

Analysis Techniques

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and read through for an overview of the data. A hybrid approach to coding was conducted. An initial approach of open coding was conducted (deductive) before going through the data line-by-line and adding additional codes as themes emerged (inductive). Further rounds of coding and re-examination of codes and categories

was conducted using the qualitative analysis software, NVivo 12. Coding using thematic analysis was applied as a systematic approach to identifying recurring ideas, concepts or themes emerging from the coded data and is a suitable approach to analysing perceptions and views from participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Students' responses to the interview questions were iteratively analysed and organised into themes of goals, help-seeking, interactions with peers, interactions with instructors, and strategies for learning. Iterative coding and categorising of data reveals commonality, differences, and relationships between the data.

Results

Help-Seeking and Peer Interactions

Students shared that they did not have sufficient or satisfactory peer-to-peer interactions despite having access to Zoom for synchronous classes and discussion boards in the Learning Management System (LMS) for asynchronous interaction.

Students reported that they had made no friends at university during their second year and regarded the technology used as an impediment to make peer friendships. For instance, Participant 8 explains, "I wish I had friends at uni that I study with, and I think Zoom doesn't really help that." Similarly, Participant 6 added that because she did not know anyone in her class and that "it's very difficult to have a relationship with anyone that I'm studying with."

Nearly half of the participants (N=11) sought out their peers for social connection and help with their learning. However, as Participant 7 noted, Zoom was not a conducive environment for students to make connections with their peers as activities were structured around short discussions about a particular topic or question and cameras were often turned off: "I've been in breakout rooms where no one has their camera or microphone on. So you can't even communicate with them and no one's saying a word because no one's there." Discussion boards in the LMS were also empty spaces void of communication between peers as reported by Participant 12: "I go to discussion board but normally, no one has posted there. And I'm too shy to post." And Participant 4: "In discussion boards, nobody else posts questions it's just a dead thing. No one uses it, so I didn't use it as well." In place of Zoom and discussion boards, students used social media tools such as WhatsApp to communicate with one another, as shared by Participant 15:

We have WhatsApp groups, and we ask questions on there, and they (peers) would answer. Everyone in the unit has joined but we don't know who is in it. 50% is the content and the next 50% is help on other things.

Students chose to use social media tools for convenience of access using their mobile phone and the absence of the instructor who they thought might make judgements about them based on the questions they were asking of each other. Participant 24 explains:

That was the only time that I ever had an interaction with peers. And I find that very strange, and, strained with online, people don't want to go.

The ability to form relationships with peers was affected when video cameras were turned off or there is minimal body language or facial expressions. For some students they felt awkward in the Zoom class as shared by:

At first I had my video on when we had that lockdown. But no one else did and then I just felt awkward. So I don't (have my video on). (Participant 1)

Instructors had intentionally scheduled Zoom classes to facilitate peer-to-peer learning, however students felt isolated from their peer network. Online breakout rooms in Zoom intended to be used for collaborative learning were spaces of silence as shared by Participant 12: "It's a waste of time to send students in breakout rooms and no one in the breakout room is talking. All videos are off and everyone is on mute", and Participant 26 noted, "There's no interaction at all. I haven't even spoken or talked during that class. And it's already week eight."

Help-Seeking and Instructor Interactions

To address RQ2, students were asked about their interactions with their instructor. Participants reflected how challenging their second year was, compared to their first year, notably in the expectations from instructors and increase in complexity of content and learning tasks. Where participants mentioned a more forgiving first-year experience, they described their second-year experience as feeling "slammed", "stressed", "overwhelmed", and "less confident". Participants shared that their feelings about their second-year experience made them less confident to ask their instructor for help. Half (N=13) of the interviewees reported that they intentionally avoided requesting help from their instructor and noted they had not met their instructor in

person which was a perceived barrier to building a relationship. Developing confidence to reach out to their instructor was necessary as shared by Participant 18: “You have to build that confidence to ask them a question.”

Participants also reported feeling “embarrassed” or “dumb” when they had asked for help, leading to intentionally avoiding their instructor for assistance. Students specifically noted that this experience was significantly different to their interactions with their first-year instructors who they perceived provided more directed guidance and encouraged students to ask for help. This jarring experience for many second years was a stated reason by some students for not reaching out to their instructor for help, as shared by Participant 8: “Most of the second-year instructors I’ve encountered are very harsh and they treat you like that’s a dumb question and say I’m not gonna answer that.” Participant 16 also stated: “I used to ask (for help) and they say they cannot, I have to do it by myself. So yeah, that’s second year.”

Where students felt confident in asking their instructor for help, there was either insufficient time available in the Zoom class, or there was no space in which to ask questions, as shared by Participant 17: “There might be chances for us to speak up”, and Participant 6: “If you’ve got questions, there’s not enough time left” ... If anyone’s got a question, you’ve got to interrupt. It’s difficult.”

Discussion

The students in our study described their interactions with peers as “strange” and “strained”. Contributing to their interactions with each other was a reluctance to use chat in Zoom classes to ask questions because they did not want to appear as being disruptive, and keeping video cameras off to avoid broadcasting their home environment to others. Gonzalez et al. (2022) report similar findings in a study of 200 undergraduate students using video technology for peer-interactions during COVID-19. Similar findings have been reported about students being reluctant to raise a digital hand in a Zoom class because it felt unnatural to ask questions in such a medium (Almendingen et al., 2021; Gonzalez et al 2022). More than half of the participants were living at home with siblings, parents, and multigenerational family members during the pandemic. Students chose to turn their video cameras off during Zoom classes because they did not want to broadcast their familial setting to their peers, or they had limited bandwidth which restricted their ability to use the camera. These findings are consistent with other studies where students’ home environment was not conducive for learning (Almendingen et al., 2021) and they wanted a separate environment for learning (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020). Hau and colleagues refer to this phenomenon as a widening of social division (Hau et al., 2022) as students found it hard to find quiet spaces at home to study, and have stable reliable Internet. In other reports where students were studying at home with shared devices and internet data, students were selective about how they used technology and whether they could afford to have their camera feed on during a video-class (Eberle & Hobrecht, 2021).

To create an online space that suited their help-seeking needs, students turned from Zoom to social media technology. Social media technology was familiar to students and afforded a transactional information exchange, rather than a video broadcast of their home environment. We found that second-year students determine they have a problem to solve and choose to use social media technology to interact with peers and engage in transactional exchanges for help to solve their problem. These findings are consistent with ERT studies of WhatsApp usage in facilitating help-seeking behaviours (Mubaraq et al., 2023; Yu & Motlhabane, 2022) except our findings reveal that second-year students had similar help-seeking behaviours to other year levels. However, in Mubaraq et al.’s study, WhatsApp was embedded in the curriculum whereas in the present study, WhatsApp was the students’ choice of technology for peer-interaction and collaboration outside of the online classroom. We suggest that technology and its role in the curriculum has a mediating effect on second-year student’s interactions with each other, and their help seeking behaviours.

Students reported a lack of meaningful interaction with their instructors which influenced their help-seeking behaviours and that they felt there was insufficient time in Zoom classes upon which to ask the instructor for help or support. Our findings suggest that the second-year students cohort lack confidence in their relationship with their instructor to seek and apply help. Where instructors have created a learning environment that promotes social interactions between students and instructors, students are more likely to evidence help-seeking behaviours (Won et al., 2021). While we did not include instructors in the study to share their perceptions of how students demonstrated help-seeking behaviours, we draw on literature to compare findings. Students learning from home during ERT conditions have reported being concerned about broadcasting their home environment to others (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020; Almendingen et al., 2021). Similarly instructors were teaching from their home, struggling to find quiet spaces to work, and sharing the internet across multiple family members (Erlam et al., 2021). We suggest that the environment within which students and instructors interact with each other influences help-seeking behaviours of students.

The theoretical framework of self-regulated learning positions help-seeking as a critical strategy for learners (Karabenick & Berger, 2013; Zimmerman, 2002). Our findings show that second-year students demonstrate some aspects of help-seeking behaviours across the self-regulated learning phases of forethought, performance, and self-reflection, and that their help-seeking is influenced by their perceptions of the interactions between each other, and with their instructor. Second-year students struggle to take steps to seek help in Zoom classes because they lack the confidence and skills to interact with their peers via this technology. These findings support outcomes reported by Broadbent and Howe (2023) who argue that learner confidence is a critical construct in self-regulated learning and affects both help-seeking behaviours and academic performance.

Our findings, which focus on second-year students, extend the outcomes of Martin's (2020) study where he calls for research across all levels of the student population on their experience during ERT. Martin's findings reveal students had poor peer interactions which made them feel isolated and unmotivated and our findings indicate that peer-interactions between second-year students not only affect their help-seeking behaviours but that the cohort feels isolated and struggle with motivation. Our findings, which focus on second-year students, extend the outcomes of Martin's (2020) study where he calls for research across all levels of the student population on their experience during ERT. Martin's findings reveal students had poor peer interactions which made them feel isolated and unmotivated and our findings indicate that peer-interactions between second-year students contributed to feelings of isolation and affected their help-seeking behaviours.

Conclusion

The use of synchronous Zoom classes remains a common tool for teaching. While the limitations of this study relate to students learning during COVID-19 and under ERT conditions, and the context of the research being in a single institution, the findings can inform post-pandemic practice. Our findings suggest that help-seeking behaviours can be improved with learning activities that foster interaction between instructors and students. Activities that enable students to form social relationships with their peers separate to formal teamwork activities could provide students with the space to develop their friendships and nurture their help-seeking behaviours. In Zoom classes, breakout rooms may be used for smaller collaborative learning, including tasks that focus on social interactions which could help alleviate the silent spaces where video cameras are turned off. Instructors can mediate the development of students' help-seeking behaviours in a couple of ways. For example, instructors could actively encourage and normalise help-seeking as a strategy for learning by acknowledging when students ask for help. Instructors could also stay on a Zoom call after a class has ended to answer any questions that students did not feel comfortable asking in front of their peers, or offering online consultation hours for small group or individual support which may help foster student-instructor relationship conducive for help-seeking. Ultimately, as discovered in this study, second-year students are still developing their help-seeking strategies and instructors need to cultivate a learning environment that is conducive for this to occur.

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