

## 2019 European Learning & Teaching Forum

### Towards successful learning: Controversies and common ground

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#### Author(s)

**Name:** Oliver Vettori

**Position:**

**Organisation:** WU Vienna (Vienna University of Economics and Business)

**Country:** Austria

**E-mail address:** [oliver.vettori@wu.ac.at](mailto:oliver.vettori@wu.ac.at)

#### Short bio:

Dr. Oliver Vettori is Dean for Accreditation and Quality Management as well as the Director of the Department for Program Management and Teaching & Learning Support at WU Vienna. He has been working as an expert in the area of quality assurance and higher education development for more than a decade (member of the IEP, ENQA, AQAS, AQ Austria and EVALAG reviewer pools; member of the Editorial Board of Quality in Higher Education; coordinator of the Quality Management and Quality Development Network of the Austrian Universities; trainer and mentor within the ASEAN-QA program). Oliver Vettori has been teaching courses on public management, research methodology, organizational behavior and evaluation theory for more than 10 years. As a Research Associate at the Institute for Public Management and the Institute for Organization Studies (both WU Vienna), he has authored dozens of publications in the area of organization theory and organization culture, quality assurance, teaching & learning and curriculum development.

**Name:** Johanna Warm

**Position:**

**Organisation:** WU Vienna (Vienna University of Economics and Business)

**Country:** Austria

**E-mail address:** [johanna.warm@wu.ac.at](mailto:johanna.warm@wu.ac.at)

#### Short bio:

MMag. Johanna Warm is a senior expert on HE pedagogy and didactics in the Teaching & Learning Development unit at WU (Vienna University of Economics and Business). She obtained her teaching degrees at the University of Salzburg, where she has worked as a research and teaching assistant in the field of linguistics. Apart from numerous publications on language in the context of social media, her current research and professional interests lie in the area of T&L policies, student conceptions of excellent teaching as well as on the role of language in promoting educational change. She is a regular speaker/trainer on T&L methods, course design and teaching staff development at WU and abroad.

## Proposal

### **Title: Learning Ergonomics – a framework to enhance learning effectiveness via context factors**

#### **Abstract:**

Despite the ever-present paradigm shift from teaching to learning, most approaches to increase learning effectiveness and learner wellbeing are driven by discourses on pedagogy and/or didactics and thus focussed on the teacher. In this paper, we propose an alternative approach to enhancing learning effectiveness, which delineates some selected contextual factors that may often be overlooked. We introduce Learning Ergonomics as a practice-oriented framework, which focusses on factors that are influenceable by either the learner or the institution. All factors included in the model, show an empirically proven impact on learning effectiveness, with the empirical evidence stemming from different disciplines.

**Key words:** Learning effectiveness, learning support, learning ergonomics, mindfulness

#### **Introduction**

How to make learning successful has been on research and policy agendas for decades – though the topic has in the past often taken a secondary role to discourses on quality assurance, research or impact. In recent years, however, teaching and learning are again gaining more attention on various policy levels, as is also mirrored in the latest position paper on Learning and Teaching of the European University Association which places student learning, needs and success at the centre of universities' educational missions (European University Association, 2018).

Yet, the focus in most approaches to student-centred learning is usually on (new) forms of teaching and learning and driven by discourses on pedagogy and/or didactics (e.g. The European Students' Union, 2015). Thus, ultimately, a large number of approaches is actually again focusing on the teacher. Although this corresponds to the dominant findings in Hattie's meta-study (Hattie, 2003) and also to students themselves who judge the teacher as an important success factor (Vettori & Warm, 2017), from an institutional perspective, this focus on the way students are instructed and courses are designed can also be regarded as a handicap: Teaching is still considered a personal matter and despite the increased efforts on staff development and teaching and learning support, progress is difficult to manage and to assess.

In this paper, we therefore propose an alternative approach to enhancing successful learning or learning effectiveness, which is less preoccupied with what happens in the classroom, but rather delineates some selected contextual factors that may often be overlooked, but have a considerable impact on the learners, including their wellbeing. We call this proposed framework "learning ergonomics", aiming to emphasise the strong practice-orientation as well as the strong focus on the learner's physiology and immediate surroundings, e.g. learning spaces. Thereby we pursue two goals: On the one hand, we intend to show that institutional efforts to enhance learning can also take alternative routes and at least complement the approaches via the classroom or the teachers. On the

other hand, and probably on a more abstract level, this is also a plea for bringing more empirical evidence into discourse and practice.

### **Contextual frameworks for learning**

Conceptually, the learning ergonomics framework is strongly built upon the premise that the student learning performance is to a substantial degree context-dependent (cf. Smith 2007: 1532). Our literature review shows that there are already different models, which take the contexts learners are working in into account, such as “Learning Ecology” (Barron 2006, 2004) or “Learning Environment” (cf. Fraser 1998) – but they mostly treat the context in which learning occurs as important, yet complex, vague and difficult to influence. The term “Learning Ergonomics” was first introduced by Smith (2007), who embedded his model in the broader concept of educational ergonomics. It is a construct that “encompasses all modes and levels of learning-design interaction that may occur in educational environments and systems” (Smith 2007, 1532). The focus on ergonomics makes the concept appear a rather technical one, stating different “classes of educational system design factors that potentially may influence student learning” (ibid.).

Smith’s model is a holistic analytical construct, which encompasses some factors that can be regulated (such as “class design” that involves size, length or starting time of classes) but also “personal factors” like native language or substance abuse, which clearly influence student learning, but cannot be regulated or managed.

Even though borrowing the term “learning ergonomics” from Smith and acknowledging some of his dimensions, we use it differently here, proposing a framework that is on the one hand more eclectic, but on the other hand provides far more orientation for practical purposes.

### **Learning Ergonomics – a practice-oriented framework**

Learning Ergonomics is meant as a practical framework for institutions that want to focus on improving learning effectiveness rather than a holistic analytical model listing all possible influencing factors.

We approach the goal of improving learning effectiveness from the institution’s perspective and hence focus on factors which are manageable or influenceable by the institution. In addition, to be included in the model, the factors needed to show an empirically proven impact on learning effectiveness, with the empirical evidence stemming from different disciplines (including medicine, ergonomics or architecture).

We identified the four dimensions “Body”, “Mind”, “Space” and “Time” which subsume contextual factors influencing learning effectiveness and learner wellbeing. Two of the factors concern the learning context (time and space) whereas the other factors regard the learner as a person (body and mind). As indicated in the model below by the arrows, the contexts of learning – space and time – can be influenced directly by the institution, for example when self-study-areas or classrooms are planned and designed or when courses and exams are scheduled. Factors concerning body and mind can only be influenced by the learner him/herself. As indicated by the dotted arrows, the institution can

influence those factors only indirectly, i.e. via the learner. Institutions can for example raise awareness regarding the benefits of exercise or a healthy diet or invite the learner to different activities.

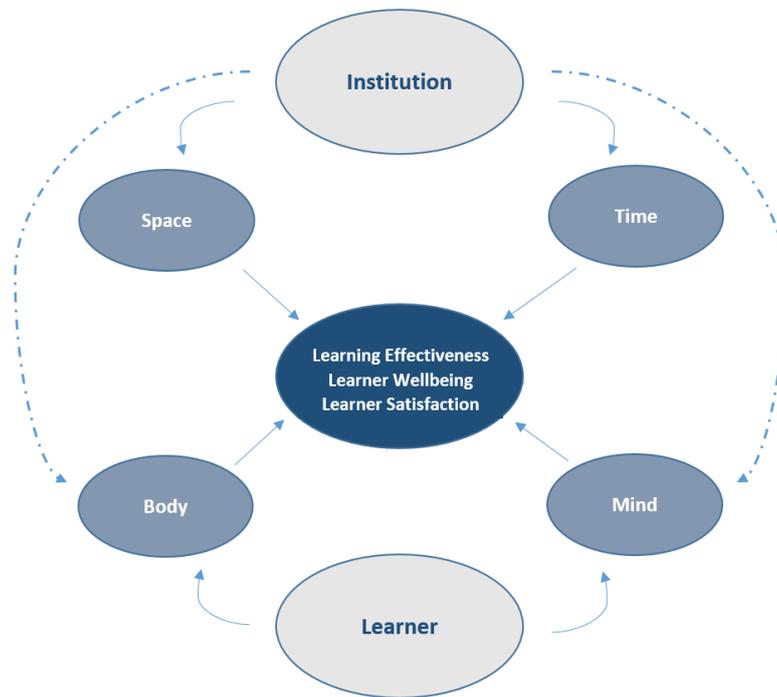


Figure 1: Learning Ergonomics

**Body** (directly influenceable by the learner, indirectly manageable by the institution)

This dimension is one that most universities do not tackle actively in the context of increasing learning effectiveness – probably because they can influence physical factors at the learner’s end only indirectly. Nevertheless, there is evidence that factors attached to this dimension, such as physical activity, exercise, relaxation or sleep influence learning:

Sleep quality and quantity, for example, are closely related to student learning capacity and academic performance (Curcio, Ferrara, & Gennaro, 2006). Poor sleep quality or sleep loss are associated with poor declarative and procedural learning in students (Gilbert & Weaver, 2010). The results of Medeiros et al. (2010) suggest that irregularities of the sleep-wake cycle influence the learning of college students. In a larger study (Gomes, Tavares, & Azevedo, 2011), different factors related to sleep quality were associated with academic performance measures.

Physical activity has repeatedly been linked with improvements in brain function and cognition (Hillman, Erickson, & Kramer, 2008, p. 58) and it is known that exercise causes changes in brain structure and function. Winter et al. (2007) found that vocabulary learning was 20 percent faster after

intense physical exercise, which shows that not only regular exercise shows effect, but that physical activity also has immediate effects on learning.

Interestingly the effect of exercise is larger on executive control, i.e. processes involved in the selection, scheduling and coordination of complex cognitive functions. Greater amounts of physical activity and/or fitness might thus lead to increased top-down control during task execution (Hillman et al., 2008, p. 61). Hence, students who exercise might be better at planning and organizing their study-time and more successful in sticking to their tasks.

It has been shown in literature that nutrition influences learning. Diets that are low in saturated fats and refined sugars are beneficial to cognition and might thus also affect cognitive performances (Deliens, Clarys, Bourdeaudhuij, & Deforche, 2013, p. 2). Switching to a balanced diet improves learning and behaviour in children (Dani, Burrill, & Demmig-Adams, 2005). Florence's et al. (2008) study showed that students with decreased overall diet quality are significantly more likely to perform poorly on the assessment.

Although the institution cannot directly influence these factors, a beneficial behaviour of the student can be supported: raising awareness about the importance of an adequate diet or beneficial sleeping habits or offering sports courses for students are possible initiatives which can be furthered by the institution. We will pursue this thought further in the second half of the paper.

**Mind** (directly influenceable by the learner, indirectly manageable by the institution)

Stress and concentration are important factors which have an impact on learning effectiveness. Different studies have shown that a high stress level in students is associated with lower course grades and poor academic performance (Felsten & Wilcox, 1992, Struthers, Perry, & Menec, 2000, Akgun & Ciarrochi 2010). It has also been shown that students with adequate coping strategies achieve better results (Struthers et al., 2000). Techniques to reduce stress can be taught. Mindfulness exercises for example, are proven to reduce manifestations of stress and anxiety caused by exams in students (Gallego, Aguilar-Parra, Cangas, Langer, & Mañas, 2015, Galante et al., 2018).

There is also evidence that training in mindfulness improves skills related to concentration, such as cognitive function and attention (Chambers, Lo, & Allen, 2008) or attending tasks without distraction (Mrazek, Franklin, Phillips, Baird, & Schooler, 2013). A recent study (Mrazek et al., 2013) showed that a two-week meditation training led to increased skills in reading comprehension and to reduced mind-wandering.

As with the factors from the "body" dimension, initiatives in this category focus on the learners, i.e. inviting them to mindfulness trainings or even embedding meditation in the curricula (as proposed in the "Munich Model" (de Bruin, 2017).

**Space** (directly manageable by the institution)

The architecture of buildings of higher education institutions has a strong influence on teaching and also research within the institution (Kunze & Schmitt, 2012). The planning of the campus, including spaces for studying, integrating personal life and work life and also designing working spaces in order to foster communication can support new modes of learning and teaching. Although the literature on the subject is still rather scarce, there have been several publications in the recent past (see e.g. the contributions in the special issue of ZfHE 7/1 (2012)).

The design of teaching rooms and learning spaces also impacts student learning (cf. e.g. Report of the Scottish Funding Council). Mirroring changing pedagogical styles, formal teaching spaces for large groups with a “sage on a stage” design are becoming less common in universities and are to a certain extent replaced by classroom designs that allow students to learn from their peers as well as from their teachers. Well-equipped libraries, group-work spaces with daylight and adjustable furniture and in-between spaces that can be used by students before and after class contribute to learner wellbeing and satisfaction (Report of the Scottish Funding Council).

The institution’s opportunities to influence space might be limited with regard to the architecture of buildings, but are manifold when it comes to classroom or learning space design. Supporting diverse didactic settings or providing adequate self-study zones for students are possible initiatives related to this dimension.

**Time** (directly manageable by the institution)

There is evidence that block courses lead to better grades and more motivated students (Metzger & Haag, 2013). Moreover a carefully planned student workload throughout the semester leads to less stress for students and increases self-study time and student satisfaction (Groß & Aufenanger, 2011). Including these considerations in the planning of schedules for the study programmes is likely to have an impact on learning effectiveness and learner wellbeing. Although these factors seem at first glance rather easy to manage by the institution, there are some obstacles that have to be surmounted: in many universities courses have to be scheduled pragmatically due to a lack of teaching rooms and the distribution of block courses and course time often relies on preferences of the teachers.

Apart from that, there are also individual circadian preferences which also have an impact on the ideal study times. The scheduling of lectures and tests may have a positive or negative effect on the individual learner’s performance, depending on whether or not the starting time corresponds with his/her individual biological rhythm (Beşoluk, Onder, & Deveci, 2011). If students know about their own chronotype they can plan their self-study time accordingly. Especially if parallel courses have to be offered, institutions could adjust the scheduling of classes in a way that students are able to choose according to their individual chronotype.

## **Learning Ergonomics at WU: Translating the framework into practice towards more successful learning**

From the very beginning, the Learning Ergonomics Framework was not intended to be a mere analytical framework, but as a multidimensional structure to guide actions and indicate areas for improvement. The first phase of related initiatives was started in spring 2018 and aimed for creating low threshold offers for students that could be easily integrated into their daily student life. In WU's undergraduate studies, students have three exam weeks each semester (one at the beginning, one in the middle and one at the end of the semester). During the week before the exam week (the so called "study week") there are no lectures scheduled and the library is highly frequented by students who prepare for the upcoming exams. It seemed prudent to take these phases of high learning activity and stress into account when launching the offers.

The most important elements of the first phase were:

- A web portal which is integrated in the Student Support Area at Learn@WU, WU's much used online learning environment ([https://learn.wu.ac.at/student-support/Learning\\_Ergonomics](https://learn.wu.ac.at/student-support/Learning_Ergonomics)). The portal introduces the students to the framework and the related activities and contains all articles that have so far been published within the context of the initiatives. Articles on the web portal are all written as short advice or reflection pieces, partly by WU's learning and student support experts and partly by renowned experts from outside the university, e.g. trainers, nutrition experts, coaches etc. The articles are organised in different rubrics that on the one hand mirror the dimensions of the model and on the other hand signal the text genre. The editorial team makes sure that all dimensions of the model are equally covered. Previous articles, for example, focussed on the influence of light on learning, the campus learning zones, yoga and physical exercises for stress relief, recipes for brain friendly snacks, mindfulness or the most suitable time windows for learning.
- A newsletter sent to all students enrolled at the university, which is issued three times per semester about two weeks before the nearest exam week. The online newsletters teaser articles, provide learning tips and inform students about the physical exercise program. The newsletter was designed in a way that it sets itself apart from the more administrative types of newsletters and student mailings. By making use of the university's official communication channels (the program is also advertised via flyers in the library, the university blog and social media and is supported by the institutional Student Union), it could be achieved that up to 1000 students access the content per issue, with articles on nutrition and learning exercises ranking as the most popular ones.
- A physical exercise program composed of short courses that are offered in the last week before each exam week in close proximity to the main library and learning zones where several thousand students study for their exams in this period. The courses are intended to create "active breaks" during study time and were specifically designed for the purpose of stress relief, brain activation and concentration support. Previous courses include "learning yoga", "mindfulness yoga", Qi Gong, meditation and "dancing as mental training".

Experienced and specially briefed trainers and coaches offer the trainings. Students can register for the courses free of charge and take a 45-minute break from their learning. The courses are scheduled throughout the week at different times, but experience so far suggests that the evening courses are the most popular ones. The last five workshops in September 2018 were taken by more than 150 students.

The initiative will be slowly expanded: Based on an ongoing evaluation, the main courses and topics for 2019 have already been planned. The three already existing building blocks of the program will be complemented by additional offers, i.e. in the form of workshops for student beginners on procrastination/self-management as well as (self)motivation. Mid-term plans include analyses on how to better align the way courses are scheduled with evidence on effective learning as well as the construction of additional recreative facilities on the campus. In addition, it is planned to encourage new original research on how to influence learning effectiveness via context factors – and to bring the teachers on board, by showing them simple techniques of how to raise the energy level at the beginning of their classes and how to help make the students more attentive.

### **Conclusion**

The Learning Ergonomics model presented in this paper is a framework for practice presenting factors which influence learning effectiveness and learner wellbeing and proposing measures that can be implemented by higher education institutions wishing to support their students. The approach allows to shift the focus from pedagogical concerns to contextual factors when trying to impact students' learning effectiveness. It therefore also allows to focus on factors that are often overlooked in "conventional" interventions. As stated before, the framework is deliberately eclectic as it focusses on manageable contextual factors.

Although the initiatives that have already been implemented have not been fully evaluated and tested for their impact on the students' learning or wellbeing so far, student feedback is already very positive – and there is a general acknowledgement that the university is trying to be innovative in this area and demonstrates that it cares for student learning success beyond the classroom. Ultimately, successful learning will need to be supported in various complementary ways at once.

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