Web-based Story Editing Interventions to Support Students at Risk and to Address Possible Stereotype Threat

Background

In "Whistling Vivaldi" Steele focuses on the phenomenon of stereotype threat as it explains the trend of minority underperformance in higher education. Steele discusses how identity contingencies can have a drastic negative effect on a person's functioning, and how these effects can explain racial and gender performance gaps in academic performance. Steele also offers a host of strategies for reducing stereotype threat, including story editing approaches.

In "Redirect" Wilson reports on a study in which college freshmen who were worrying about their grades and not doing well academically were targeted with a simple story editing intervention. Compared to a randomly assigned control group of students who didn't get any information about grade improvement, those who got the story prompt achieved better grades in the following year and were less likely to drop out of college.

Trends over the last decade at Stellenbosch University indicate that a large percentage of first-year students underperform during their first year, that white students (the majority) outperform non-white students at undergraduate level and that male engineering students achieve better first-year grades than females (the minority). This clearly opens the door for story editing interventions.

Aims

The aims of this study were to collect evidence of possible stereotype threat by studying trends in retention, weighted first-year performance and throughput rates per race, gender and faculty level over the last ten cohorts, and to design web-based story editing interventions that could possibly be used to improve performance (like Wilson) and address signs of stereotype threat (like Steele). A simulation was built in 2011, the interventions will be undertaken in 2012 and its effect will be traced in 2013.

Description

Sophisticated management information systems were used to study the retention, success and throughput rates as well as the weighted first-year performances of the last ten first-year cohorts in order to find evidence of possible stereotype threat at our university and to identify the struggling first-year students that may also benefit from story editing interventions.

Web-based story editing interventions were designed for all struggling first-year students as well as for nonwhite students and female engineering students who might experience the consequences of stereotype threat. Each intervention first tells the student's own life story (compiled from his/her biographical information) and then continues to provide the life stories of students very similar to the student (in terms of race, gender, home language, type of accommodation, financial support, field of study, grade 12 results and weighted average after the first semester at university (if appropriate)) and, very importantly, who were successful at university. It is hoped that these role models will inspire students to excel academically. Our simulation targeted 3810 different students with these web-based stories. See <u>http://www.sun.ac.za/trackwell/direct11/example.htm</u> for examples.

Conclusion

Clear evidence was found that confirms the strong possibility of the presence of stereotype threat. Novel ways were used to construct web-based story editing intervention to address this threat and to inspire struggling first-year students.