Study habits as a key factor in achieving meaningful learning in private higher education

Hábitos de estudio como factor clave en el logro del aprendizaje significativo en educación superior privada

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Abstract

University students face various academic and professional challenges, and their success or failure largely depends on their study habits. In this context, the objective of this article was to analyze the relationship between study habits and meaningful learning among students majoring in Neonatal Care Nursing at a university in Lima. To this end, a quantitative approach was used, with a non-experimental, correlational design. The sample consisted of 80 nursing students specializing in neonatal care. The results revealed a significant hypothesis test ($p = 0.020$); consequently, a significant correlation between study habits and meaningful learning is demonstrated in this group of students. In conclusion, strengthening study habits can significantly contribute to achieving meaningful learning in the training of neonatal care nurses.

Keywords: environmental conditions, meaningful learning, study habits.

Resumen
Los estudiantes universitarios enfrentan diversos desafíos académicos y profesionales, y el éxito o fracaso en su desempeño depende en gran medida de sus hábitos de estudio. En este contexto, el objetivo de este artículo fue analizar la relación entre los hábitos de estudio y el aprendizaje significativo en estudiantes de la segunda especialidad en Enfermería en Cuidado Neonatal de una universidad de Lima. Para ello, se empleó un enfoque cuantitativo, con un diseño no experimental y de nivel correlacional. Asimismo, la muestra estuvo conformada por 80 estudiantes de enfermería especializados en cuidado neonatal. Los resultados revelaron que la prueba de hipótesis fue significativa (p = 0.020); en consecuencia, se demuestra la existencia de una correlación significativa entre los hábitos de estudio y el aprendizaje significativo en este grupo de estudiantes. En conclusión, fortalecer los hábitos de estudio puede contribuir de manera importante al logro de aprendizajes significativos en la formación de enfermeros especialistas en cuidado neonatal.

Palabras clave: condiciones ambientales, aprendizajes significativos, hábitos de estudios.

Introduction

During their university years, students face various limitations that hinder the achievement of deep learning, particularly at more specialized academic levels. In many cases, students tend to memorize large amounts of information to meet their academic goals, intending to retain what they have learned. However, this strategy often results in the rapid forgetting of content and demonstrates a widespread lack of understanding regarding the importance of developing effective study habits. In this context, it is crucial for students to learn and comprehend their study habits as an integral part of their professional training, as these habits are essential for maintaining good academic performance throughout their university journey (Instituto Africano de Gestión de Proyectos, 2018).

From a theoretical perspective, study habits are supported by the ideas of Piaget & Inhelder (1973), who indicate that students design their own learning strategies. According to these authors, meaningful learning occurs when educational processes are linked to students' personal interests, which strengthens and reinforces the knowledge acquired. In this context, study sessions outside the classroom represent valuable opportunities for autonomous learning. Nevertheless, it is common for university students to study without applying a clear or defined strategy. Moreover, it has been observed that approximately 20% of study time is lost due to distractions, which negatively affect exam performance (Walck-Shannon et al., 2021).

In line with the above, Salamea-Nieto & Cedillo-Chalaco (2021) highlighted various relevant indicators among the analyzed students, such as clarity about the reasons for studying, the relationship between courses taken and their personal interests, the efficiency of rest, the methodology employed, and time organization for studying. They also emphasized the importance of attention and note-taking during classes, as well as prior preparation through review and memorization methods before evaluations. Consequently, current university students require dynamic and interactive teaching, wherein educators integrate the curriculum and plan activities that promote active learning, the development of competencies, skills, and abilities, as well as communication, collaboration, and engagement (Ramos-Vallecillo et al., 2024).

On the other hand, it is important to note that approximately 15% of university students in North America do not complete their higher education. This figure increases considerably in Latin America, where between 40% and 70% of university students drop out before graduating. Countries like Colombia have an academic dropout rate close to 36%, partly attributed to factors related to limitations in study habits (Organización Mundial de la Salud, 2020).

In Peru, between 2012 and 2018, a university dropout rate of 24.6% was reported in the eastern region, while in rural areas it reached 18.2%, and in Lima and Callao it was 13.4% (Superintendencia Nacional de Educación Superior Universitaria, 2020). Nationally, 17.6% of university students did not complete their higher education. In light of this reality, the following research question was posed: What is the relationship between study habits and meaningful learning among university students in the nursing specialty?

In this regard, a study conducted by Nuwagaba et al. (2022) demonstrated a positive correlation between study habits and learning outcomes. Students exhibited adequate habits in areas such as reading and exam performance, as well as acceptable habits related to time management, physical condition, note-taking, motivation, and memorization. Furthermore, both university administrators and parents actively participated in organizing programs that promote the acquisition of good study habits among university students.

Additionally, De La Hoz Pinto (2021) notes that study habits are acquired through consistently repeated actions. Generally, these habits are generic rather than specific, yet they have profoundly influenced people's lives

over time. While it is often assumed that study habits consolidate at some point in life, these patterns may be limited to general behaviors such as practice and repetition. However, more internal behaviors, such as concentration, comprehension, and task orientation, vary according to life stages (Pandey & Pal, 2023).

Moreover, study habits encompass various behaviors, from the time dedicated to study to the strategies employed and the environment in which they occur. In this sense, Bjork & Bjork (2011) describe two types of effective habits: the use of study strategies and the promotion of students generating their own content or self-assessing during the process. This involves distributing study time over different periods and avoiding cramming just before exams.

Fernández-Pozar (2024) outlines several dimensions that maximize the effectiveness and efficiency of study habits as activities that reinforce learning. Among them, environmental conditions are highlighted, noting that achieving good academic performance requires studying in distraction-free, well-lit, and organized environments, without the presence of cell phones, televisions, radios, or other devices that may interfere. These conditions favor the concentration necessary for academic tasks and exam preparation.

Similarly, study planning is key, as it involves defining specific schedules for tasks in each subject. Students who know how to organize themselves and adhere to their study plan tend to achieve better academic results, provided they set clear objectives that contribute to their goals.

Additionally, Fernández-Pozar emphasizes the importance of the appropriate use of study materials, which should be accessible, easy to handle, and available in an environment dedicated to academic activities. Finally, he mentions the assimilation of content, referring to students' ability to understand, remember, analyze, and construct their learning from the information received.

In line with this, Kostiainen et al. (2018) indicate that the acquisition of new knowledge is facilitated when it builds upon prior knowledge, contributing to cognitive organization and the construction of meanings through the interpretation of information and experiences connected with previously acquired knowledge.

For learning to be truly meaningful, it is essential for the student to develop the ability to "learn to learn," a transversal competency that provides them with conceptual, methodological, and attitudinal tools essential for their education (Espinosa González et al., 2024).

On the other hand, achieving meaningful learning requires two fundamental conditions. Firstly, the student must have a favorable disposition towards learning; if motivation is lacking, it is the teacher's responsibility to foster the student's engagement and acceptance. Secondly, the material presented must be potentially significant, meaning it should be logical and capable of establishing substantial—not arbitrary—connections with the student's cognitive structure (Contreras Ore, 2016).

In this same regard, Ausubel (1969) conceptualizes meaningful learning as a process in which the individual constructs their own knowledge by relating new concepts to information they already possess. To facilitate this process, guides are provided that promote self-regulated learning, where students develop the ability to plan, control, and direct their own learning through metacognitive, motivational, and behavioral processes. This is supported by the use of strategies, study habits, and techniques that enable them to achieve their objectives and improve their academic performance.

Regarding the types of meaningful learning, several categories are highlighted. Representational learning is based on assigning specific meanings to concrete symbols, such as words or concepts, and usually develops primarily during childhood. In contrast, conceptual learning begins in childhood when a person expands their vocabulary and starts structuring it into sentences, using combinations of symbols that can be reorganized or recategorized. Finally, propositional learning implies that ideas expressed through propositions form concepts; in this case, the goal is not only to learn the isolated meaning of words or symbols but to understand comprehensively what they represent (Ausubel, 2002).

Concerning the dimensions of meaningful learning, the dimension of learning through progressive differentiation refers to the construction of specific knowledge based on prior learning that must be reinforced and utilized consistently to generate new knowledge. The dimension of integrative differentiation learning involves eliminating differences, integrating meanings, and resolving inconsistencies through processes of superordination and elaboration characteristic of cognitive structures. Lastly, the dimension of reconciliatory combinatory learning is characterized by the fact that learning does not arise from subordination or superordination links but through knowledge interactions that generate components in the student's cognitive structures, using indicators such as relationship, comparison, and generalization (Rodríguez, 2011).

Thus, the objective of this study was to establish the correlation between study habits and meaningful learning among students majoring in Neonatal Care Nursing at a university in Lima.

Methodology

This research was conducted under a quantitative approach, allowing for the measurement and numerical analysis of the relationship between study habits and meaningful learning in university students. A non-experimental correlational design was adopted, as the variables were not manipulated; instead, the aim was to identify and quantify the association between them.

The population consisted of 100 students majoring in Neonatal Intensive Care Nursing at a university in Lima. For sample selection, probabilistic sampling was applied, resulting in a total of 80 students who met the inclusion criteria: being enrolled in the specialty, consenting to participate voluntarily, and signing the informed consent form. Students who did not attend the application of the instrument or were not enrolled during the study period were excluded.

Regarding the measurement of study habits, the Study Habits Inventory developed by Fernández-Pozar (2024) was used, a validated and reliable instrument for the Peruvian context. It evaluates various dimensions, such as environmental conditions, study planning, material use, and content assimilation. The reliability of this scale was confirmed through the KR20 coefficient, which reached a value of 0.817 in this study, indicating good internal consistency.

On the other hand, meaningful learning was measured using a questionnaire adapted from the proposals of Gomez Foster (2013) and Condor Mejía (2022), also validated for Peruvian university contexts. This instrument showed high reliability, with a KR20 of 0.912, and assesses students' ability to relate new knowledge to prior knowledge, as well as their disposition and motivation towards learning.

Data were collected through surveys administered in person, ensuring ethical respect in research, anonymity, and voluntary participation of the subjects. During the administration, students were instructed to respond honestly, and all arising questions were clarified.

Finally, to analyze the relationship between study habits and meaningful learning, the Spearman correlation coefficient was employed, as the data did not fully meet the normality conditions required for parametric tests. This analysis allowed for the identification of both the strength and direction of the association between the general variables and their specific dimensions.

Results

Through hypothesis testing and a thorough analysis of various dimensions, significant data has been obtained that highlights the importance of study habits in achieving truly meaningful learning. These findings not only enrich knowledge in the field of higher education but also provide valuable guidance for designing effective educational strategies capable of fostering meaningful and sustainable learning among university students. Below are the detailed results obtained, along with a discussion of their implications in the context of academic training in specialized nursing care for neonates.

Table 1

Levels of study habits and meaningful learning in university students

			Meaningful learning		Total
			Medium	High	
Study habits	Medium	n	10	8	18
		%	12.5%	10%	22.5%
	High	n	24	38	62
		%	30%	47.5%	77.5%
Total		**n**	**34**	**46**	**80**
		%	**42.5%**	**57.5%**	**100%**

Regarding study habits, it was observed that 12.5% of students presented a medium level, while the same group also achieved a medium level in meaningful learning. Conversely, 10% of students exhibited high levels in both aspects. Additionally, 30% of students reached a high level in their study habits, with 47.5% of this group demonstrating high levels of meaningful learning.

Table 2

Relationship between environmental conditions and meaningful learning

			Meaningful learning		Total
			Medium	High	
Environmental conditions	Low		1	0	1
			1.3%	0.0%	1.3%
	Medium		17	14	31
			21.3%	17.5%	38.8%
	High		16	32	48
			20.0%	40.0%	60.0%
Total			34	46	80
			42.5%	**57.5%**	**100.0%**

In terms of environmental conditions, 1.3% of students presented a low level, while this group achieved a medium level in meaningful learning. Additionally, 21.3% showed a medium level in environmental conditions, corresponding to a medium level of meaningful learning, while 17.5% reached high levels in this latter aspect. Finally, among those with high environmental conditions, 20% attained a medium level of meaningful learning, while 40% achieved a high level.

Table 3

Link between study planning and meaningful learning of university students

			Meaningful learning		Total
			Medium	High	
Study planning	Medium		15	24	39
			18.8%	30.0%	48.8%
	High		19	22	41
			23.8%	27.5%	51.2%
Total			**34**	**46**	**80**
			42.5%	**57.5%**	**100.0%**

Regarding study planning, 18.8% of students presented a medium level, corresponding to a medium level of meaningful learning. Meanwhile, 23.8% showed a medium level in study planning, aligned with a medium level of meaningful learning, while 27.5% reached high levels in the latter aspect. Among those demonstrating high study planning, 23.8% achieved a medium level of meaningful learning, and 27.5% attained a high level.

Table 4

Impact of material use on meaningful learning of university students

			Meaningful learning		Total
			Medium	High	
Material use	Low	n	4	0	4
		%	5.0%	0%	5%
	Medium	n	8	7	15
		%	10%	8.8%	18.8%
	High	n	22	39	61
		%	27.5%	48.8%	76.3%
Total		n	34	46	80
		%	42.5%	57.5%	100.0%

In relation to material use, it was observed that 5% of students presented a low level, achieving a medium level in meaningful learning. Furthermore, 10% showed a medium level in material use, also corresponding to a medium level of meaningful learning, while 8.8% reached high levels in this aspect. Finally, among those with high material use, 27.5% attained a medium level of meaningful learning, while 48.8% reached a high level.

Table 5

Content assimilation and meaningful learning of university students

			Meaningful learning		Total
			Medium	High	
Content assimilation	Low	n	1	0	1
		%	1,3%	0%	1,3%
	Medium	n	13	18	31
		%	16,3%	22,5%	38,8%
	High	n	20	28	48
		%	25,0%	35%	60%
Total		n	34	46	80
		%	42,5%	57,5%	100%

Regarding content assimilation, 1.3% of students presented a low level, achieving a medium level in meaningful learning. Additionally, 16.3% showed a medium level in content assimilation, which also aligned with a medium level of meaningful learning, while 22.5% reached high levels in this aspect. Finally, among those demonstrating high content assimilation, 25% obtained a medium level of meaningful learning, while 35% achieved a high level.

Hypothesis testing

The testing of the general hypothesis revealed a significant relationship between study habits and meaningful learning among students majoring in Neonatal Care Nursing. This finding aligns with various studies highlighting how study habits and techniques directly influence the quality of learning, promoting the construction of deep and lasting knowledge.

Table 6

Testing of the general hypothesis

			Study habits	Meaningful learning
Spearman's Rho	Study habits	Correlation coefficient	1.0000	0.259*
		Sig. (two-tailed)	.	0.020
		N	80	80
	Meaningful learning	Correlation coefficient	0.259*	1.0000
		Sig. (two-tailed)	0.020	.
		N	80	80

Upon testing the general hypothesis, a Spearman correlation coefficient (Rho) of 0.259 was obtained, indicating a low but significant correlation, with a p-value of 0.020, below the 0.05 threshold for acceptance. Consequently, the alternative hypothesis was accepted, and the null hypothesis was rejected.

On the other hand, testing of the specific hypotheses revealed a significant relationship between the variables of environmental conditions, study planning, material use, content assimilation, and meaningful learning among students majoring in Nursing.

Table 7
Testing of the specific hypotheses

			Environmental conditions	Meaningful learning
Spearman's Rho	Environmental conditions	Correlation coefficient	1.00	0.370**
		Sig. (two-tailed)	.	0.001
		N	80	80
			Study planning	**Meaningful learning**
	Study planning	Correlation coefficient	1.00	0.045
		Sig. (two-tailed)	.	0.695
		N	80	80
			Material use	**Meaningful learning**
	Material use	Correlation coefficient	1.000	0.312**
		Sig. (two-tailed)	.	0.005
		N	80	80
			Content assimilation	**Meaningful learning**
	Content assimilation	Correlation coefficient	1.000	0.075
		Sig. (two-tailed)	.	0.508
		N	80	80

It is observed that the significance for environmental conditions and material use is 0.001, a value lower than 0.05, thus the hypothesis is accepted in these cases. Conversely, no significant correlation was found between study planning and content assimilation with meaningful learning in university students.

Discussion

This study aimed to establish the correlation between study habits and meaningful learning in university students. The results showed a moderate and significant relationship, with a coefficient of 0.259, indicating a low but direct correlation and a p-value less than 0.020. This allows us to infer that as levels of study habits increase, so does meaningful learning. These findings align with those reported by Jolly & Sethi (2024), who found a correlation between study habits and academic motivation in university students, suggesting a relevant impact from dimensions such as time management, motivation for learning, and exam preparation.

In this context, Cayo Mamani (2023) notes that today's individuals must develop higher-level skills to make decisions regarding the information they receive, given the pace and volume of data production. This implies that students achieve meaningful learning through the appropriate use of metacognitive strategies, enabling them to develop both basic and more complex skills. Following this line, we are faced with a new paradigm that demands greater capacities for analysis, reflection, synthesis, and evaluation, necessitating the implementation of pedagogical guidelines that support innovative methods and foster positive attitudes towards study.

Moreover, for students to learn effectively, it is essential to identify at what stage of planning and execution errors occur, as these inflection points represent opportunities to enhance learning. Without clear answers regarding set goals, outcomes and expectations can vary considerably (Tello Gonzales, 2024).

Additionally, Alarcón Mestanza (2025) emphasizes that a key element in evaluating the effectiveness of study habits is content assimilation. Therefore, he highlights the importance of self-evaluation strategies in the learning process, not only to identify strengths and weaknesses but also to diagnose and select study techniques

that suit each student's unique learning style. Throughout their academic journey, students experiment with various techniques, yielding varied results depending on the field of knowledge, allowing for the assessment of the relationship between effort and achievement.

In this sense, study techniques, understood as a set of systematic activities that students perform to manage, comprehend, and remember knowledge, can be categorized into basic types such as perception, retrieval, self-regulation, and cooperation. Their goal is to guide students toward specific methods that facilitate the efficient capture and learning of information (Mendoza Núñez et al., 2025).

Finally, Bonilla Quito & Juela Arízaga (2024) indicate that educational institutions face the ongoing challenge of ensuring the continuity and completion of their students' studies. It is essential to consider multiple variables influencing academic dropout, such as self-efficacy, the environment in which activities are conducted, and home characteristics. Among these factors, the development of good study habits stands out. The perception of having a suitable place, schedule, and environment has proven to enhance the effective completion of academic tasks.

Together, these findings underscore the importance of strengthening study habits and learning strategies to improve academic performance and promote meaningful and sustainable learning in university education.

Conclusions

This study, which analyzed the correlation between study habits and meaningful learning among students majoring in neonatal care nursing, demonstrated a significant relationship between both factors. In particular, it was highlighted that the appropriate use of educational materials is positively associated with higher levels of meaningful learning.

However, despite the relevance of this finding, study planning and content assimilation did not show a statistically significant correlation with meaningful learning. These results suggest that, while educational materials play a fundamental role in the learning process, aspects such as study organization and deep understanding of content may require a more specific approach to effectively influence the learning of nursing students in neonatal care.

Therefore, it is recommended that educational institutions and educators in this area place particular emphasis on fostering effective study habits, highlighting the appropriate use of educational materials. Additionally, it is crucial to develop strategies that promote a more structured study plan and facilitate deep content assimilation, in order to optimize the learning process and academic performance in this specialty.

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