Write the Lightning
How university students' writing practices further and hinder their study engagement

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We are currently in the midst of what has recently been called a veritable 'motivation crisis' (Katznelson, Sørensen & Illeris 2018) with detrimental implications for young peoples' study engagement. What might be called 'study pathologies' such as anxiety and depression have been on the rise during the past 10 to 15 years. Now, what can be done about these dire phenomena within the parameters of our university institutions?

In my paper presentation I would like to introduce my ph.d.-project Written Engagement and share the preliminary findings. The project's focus is the psychologically and socio-culturally intricate relationship between undergraduate students' academic writing practices and their varying degree of study engagement. In my project I draw on three different research traditions, namely, socio-cultural learning theory (Vygotsky and Engeström), academic writing research (Ivanic and Lillis) and motivation and engagement psychology (Bandura, Deci and Ryan and Kahu). In my project I bring these three traditions into a new and constructive dialogue concerning the topic of how university students' writing practices are reciprocally related to their degree of study engagement.

My ph.d.-project involves a mixed methods exploration of university students' thoughts and feelings in regard to the relation between how they write and how engaged they are in studying. The qualitative part of the project's methodological design implies a series of phenomenological life world interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann 2015) with third semester students at the University of Southern Denmark, i.e. biology students from the faculty of science, economy students from the faculty of business and social sciences and philosophy students from the faculty of humanities. The quantitative part of the project entails a digital survey where the respondent populations are the students of the same year as the students I interviewed for the qualitative part. The data generated on the basis of the survey will undergo correlation and regression analyses in SPSS in order to find out which – if any – of my work hypotheses from the analysis of the qualitative data might be generalized or said to be representative of the total population of my investigation.

I expect my ph.d. research project to enable me to shed new light on how university writing didactics as well as the socio-cultural circumstances under which undergraduate students write affect the students' study engagement. On the basis of the conclusive insights of my ph.d.-project I also expect to be able to formulate novel and pragmatically useful suggestions as to how we might go about the business of revising current tendencies in university writing didactics in order to facilitate undergraduate students' writing practices so that the students become more engaged in their studies than they would otherwise have become. Thus, ultimately, my research goal is to solve the puzzle of how university students can be made to 'write the lightning' of their respective disciplines and find a greater existential meaning with their academic pursuits.