

EFFECTIVE TEACHING PRACTICES REDEFINED

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ABSTRACT

The education sector in Malaysia is becoming increasingly competitive and in order for the college to emerge at the top, effective teaching that promotes student learning must be emphasized. However, the extent to which lecturers understand the meaning of effective teaching is debatable. Following the framework of Berliner (1988) and Sandholtz (2011), both studies agree that student learning can only occur if teachers deal with classroom management concerns first before focusing on teaching instruction. The latter study even pointed out that teachers are often engaged in instructive methodologies instead of reviewing classroom management as a means of effective teaching. This has triggered us to examine our college lecturers' perspectives of this issue: to query and inspect the extent of our college lecturers' understanding of effective teaching and we hope to clarify and redefine the prerequisites of being an effective lecturer.

This study is conducted by means of a survey to investigate the responses and views of Sunway College lecturers towards the strategies and approaches they have undertaken in classrooms and will aim to understand the subjective meaning of their experience. In addition, the effectiveness of the strategies and approaches employed by lecturers in class would be evaluated from the students' viewpoints, in lieu of seeking parallelism in views.

The outcome of this investigation is intended to provide our college lecturers a more accurate direction towards an effective teaching practice. In addition, students' perspectives in productive learning can be reestablished, which would allow us to reflect and improvise on our current teaching skills and ultimately achieve a more successful breakthrough at both ends.

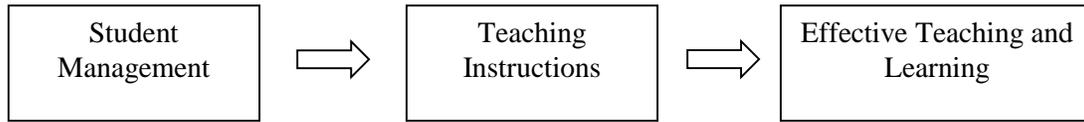
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INTRODUCTION

Effective teaching skill is a significant aspect of professional practice, with broad implications on student learning and welfare. An effective teaching practice comprises of two main segments: classroom management and instructions, which ultimately leads to productive learning in students. A previous study by Doyle (1986) had clearly distinguished between the segments: classroom management is associated with managing student behavior and classroom discipline. It focuses on the actions and strategies teachers use to solve the problem of order in classrooms, which are substantial in making class instructions more efficiently executed. However, the practice of being an effective teacher is often associated with employing teaching instructions rather than developing a good classroom management amongst students.

The conceptual framework of this study has been stimulated by two studies: Berliner (1988) stated that teachers must exhibit a minimum level of competency in managing students' behavior before they are able to effectively incorporate more complex instructional techniques in a classroom.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



(Source: Sandholtz, 2011)

A further study by Sandholtz (2011) demonstrated that student learning can only occur if teachers deal with classroom management concerns first before focusing on teaching instruction. The study has clearly pointed out that teachers know the importance of classroom management but often put teaching instructions as the main gauge as to whether their teaching is effective or otherwise. Hence, it triggers us to examine our college lecturers' perspectives of this issue as we aim to access their understanding of being an effective lecturer and to redefine the concept of effective teaching in class if necessary. We would also like to offer suggestions on the areas in which improvements can be done for effective teaching to take place, by means of an analysis that explore the efficacy of strategies and approaches used by our college lecturers in different education programmes to ensure effective teaching occurs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Following the study of Sandholtz (2011), effective instructions consist of 7 sub codes as follows: standards and objectives, student participation, planning and preparation, knowledge of students, student understanding and restructured lessons, as well as subject matter knowledge.

Table 1: Effective Instructions and Its Sub Codes

Standards and objectives	Covering the syllabi in a given time frame and achieving high percentages of passes
Student Participation	An environment where students are motivated for active learning
Planning and preparation	The preparation completed prior to the classroom teaching
Knowledge of students	The ability to judge students' prior knowledge and bridging
Student Understanding	Students expressed learning of the subject as teachers build on students' prior knowledge, connecting to students' experiences and addressing needs of all learners
Restructured lessons	On the spot decisions to change plans and to deviate from lesson plans to increase student understanding
Subject matter knowledge	Having mastery over the subject matter

(Source: Sandholtz (2011), NBPTS (1999))

The 4 sub codes for classroom management are:

Table 2: Classroom Management and Its Sub Codes

Rules and Policies	Well designed and procedures set for effective management of student behavior
Incident with specific student	Ability of teachers to handle an impromptu situation appropriately, consistently and in a sensitive manner
Classroom Climate	Having positive teacher-student relationships
Reinforcement Systems	A system that provides consistent consequences to specific behaviours

(Source: Sandholtz (2011), Sayeski and Brown (2011))

It is clear that classroom management and issues of behavior and discipline have long been reported as consistent sources of teacher stress. They affect their levels of job satisfaction, intention to leave and affect relationships with students and colleagues (Austin *et al.*, 2005). This need not be the case given that teachers continue to identify classroom management as a prominent concern and an area in which they seek more preparation (Meister & Melnick, 2003; Melnick & Meister, 2008). Teacher education programmes needs to prepare candidates to manage the classroom effectively before focusing on instruction and its impact on student learning.

METHODOLOGY

A survey was conducted as the primary data source for this study aiming at 25 lecturers and 90 students of Sunway College Johor Bahru. The responses were analyzed qualitatively using the social constructivist research paradigm. The participants' views of the situation were examined to understand the subjective meaning of their experiences (Creswell, 2007). The responses were centered on examining the written surveys on two levels. At the first level, the participants' views were coded according to pre-specified primary code of effective teaching: classroom management or instruction. On this level, the lecturers were asked to describe a teaching experience that they would handle the same way again and to describe a teaching experience that they would handle differently if they could. Similar questions were also given to the students from the Pre-University, Diploma and Degree programmes where they were asked to describe an effective teaching and learning experience which they would like their lecturer to replicate and a teaching and learning experience which they would like to suggest changes to. Using the distinctions from Table 1 and 2, we were able to classify whether teachers and students prioritize teaching instructions or classroom management as a gauge of effective teaching.

On the second level, the respondents were asked to identify the top six factors that contribute to effective teaching and learning. 11 criteria (Table 3) were mapped out of the 6 sub codes of effective instructions and 4 sub codes for classroom management (refer Table 1 and 2). The results were analyzed quantitatively to identify the criterion that contributes to effective teaching for teachers and students alike. The scores were summed up and arranged in an ascending order with the lowest scores ranked the first, and so on. An independent-samples t-test was then performed to compare the scores of the sub codes between two cohorts to determine its significance, indicated as *p* value. Further analysis was also conducted to look for parallelism in views.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Of the 25 lecturers who responded to the survey, an overwhelming 68% of them focused on teaching instructions when they were asked to describe a teaching experience they would handle the same way again. Only 32% described experiences related to classroom management. When describing a teaching experience that they would handle differently, 77% of them again focused on instructions. This pattern suggests that the lecturers in this college often equate effective teaching with the success of their teaching instructions.

On the other hand, close to 50% of the students attributed effective teaching to proper classroom management. This finding is in line with the literatures and shed light concerning our teaching experiences at Sunway College Johor Bahru. It is clear that the lecturers attributed effective teaching to the success of their teaching instructions, while a higher percentages of students place priority on proper classroom management.

For ineffective teaching, 60.3% of the students responded that it was due to ineffective teaching instructions. Hence, it is clear that although teachers spend most of their time improving their teaching instructions, students are not convinced that effective teaching and learning has taken place. The probable answer lies in the fact that whilst effective instructions are important, proper classroom management is the prerequisite of effective teaching and learning.

An example of how a well-planned lesson can go awry is explained by a teacher below:

“A student was imitating me throughout the lesson. I tried to ignore him and finally it went out of hand. If such situation happens again, I would stop my lesson and deal with it immediately.”

This is a case of how classroom management issues can hamper effective teaching and learning and although teachers are well prepared and deliver the lesson as planned, the objectives of the lesson may not have been transferred effectively to the students. This result supports the findings of many literatures which advocate proper classroom management for effective learning to take place.

With a more detailed analysis, it was obvious that novice teachers and experienced teachers have contrasting views on this issue. 80% of novice teachers thought that teaching instructions were more important for effective teaching whilst only 45% of experienced teachers thought this way. This shows that novice teachers have not understood what was effective teaching and learning.

Top Six Factors of Effective Teaching and Learning

Table 3 displays the ranking of the 11 sub codes indicated by all the 25 lecturers and 90 students. The ranks are indicated in numbers, the lowest being the most important and the highest being the least important. As shown in the table, the rankings of all aspects between the lecturers' and the students' are compared. The significant level between the scores is indicated by their corresponding *p* values.

Table 3: The Ranking of the Important Aspects Required for Teaching and Learning to be Effective in a Classroom

CRITERION	METHOD	RANK		p-value*
		LECTURERS	STUDENTS	
Sufficient planning and preparation of lessons	Teaching Instruction	1	1	> 0.05
Have mastery over the subject matter	Teaching Instruction	2	7	< 0.05
Impromptu restructuring of lesson to meet students' needs, i.e. able to recognize if students face difficulties in learning and promptly restructuring the teaching methodology to suit their needs.	Teaching Instruction	3	3	> 0.05
The ability to help students obtain the required knowledge	Teaching Instruction	4	4	> 0.05
The ability to respond to new procedures or routine in response to a specific classroom situation, i.e. able to control highly emotional students	Classroom management	5	5	> 0.05
Achieve standards and objectives, i.e. complete syllabus on time, achieve a high percentage of As, achieve high passing rate	Teaching Instruction	6	2	< 0.05
The ability to recognize and reward students according to their capacities	Classroom management	7	10	< 0.05
The ability to build good rapport with students	Classroom management	8	6	< 0.05
The ability to coax students to participate with a high level of engagement	Teaching Instruction	9	9	> 0.05
To be impartial and unbiased in student management	Classroom management	10	8	< 0.05
The ability to enforce rules and policies	Classroom management	11	9	< 0.05

*Note: Correlation is significant when $p < 0.05$ (2-tailed).

The results demonstrated that the top six criteria for effective teaching amongst lecturers mainly focused on teaching instructions, which correlates with the earlier findings. The areas which lecturers thought were important were lesson planning and preparation, subject matter knowledge, knowledge of students, students understanding and restructured lessons (refer to Table 1). The only classroom management sub code that was considered vital was to be able to manage incident with a specific student, while other sub codes as listed in Table 2 were of less priority.

The planning and preparation sub code was ranked the most crucial factor of effective teaching and learning by both the lecturers and students. This is likely to be due to the extensive subject syllabus that has to be completed within a short duration. Therefore, thorough planning of a lesson was deemed significant amongst the lecturers in order to deliver the subject according to the time frame given and to prepare the students for the final examinations.

Lecturers also believed that it is essential to have mastery over the subject that he/she teaches. This is probably rational as an academic qualification is often used as a preliminary measure of a teacher's competencies. Furthermore, teachers see themselves as the "walking bible" for the subject, hence the urge to be good in what he/she does. However, there is a disagreement in this aspect from the students' perspectives. Students did not rank this sub code as highly as the lecturers did. Whilst the lecturers place great priority on mastery of the subject matter, students say that good rapport is more important for effective teaching and learning. This highlights the significance of classroom management whilst having mastery over the subject matter. This finding clearly shows that classroom management is more important than what the lecturers perceived and data from the open ended questions supported the finding that effective learning occurred only when there was interaction with their lecturers.

Restructured lesson is unanimously ranked the third most important teaching aspect by the lecturers and students. The process may seem taxing but it appears to be playing a substantial role in an effective teaching and learning process. In the questionnaire where lecturers were asked to describe a teaching experience that they would handle the same way again, one lecturer had tailored a computer simulation to aid students' understanding of the concept of projectile motion and she found it useful as there was more active learning observed amongst her students whilst ensuring that the knowledge was imparted. Another lecturer also gave an impromptu exercise as many students did not grasp the concept well and were not able to apply it appropriately in answering questions. As students' answers were presented on the board and corrected tactfully by the teacher, it has helped students to clarify the mistakes which further improved their understanding of the concept discussed. This is consistent with the students' feedback where they felt learning would have been more effective if their teachers could restructure their lessons by adapting non-conventional strategies, for example, mind-mapping, oral quizzes, games and group discussions or make a summary at the end of lessons while others grasped better when demonstrations on certain areas of subject were performed.

In addition, both cohorts also see the importance of the ability of the teacher to gap students to the required knowledge, which falls under the sub code of students' knowledge. In our investigation, 3 lecturers related that their teachings were productive and students responded positively when induction was set at the beginning of their lessons. An introduction which linked students to what they have learned before has provided the students necessary outlines to the purposes and values of the new topic. On top of the efforts in bridging knowledge, our lecturers also find it helpful when they associated new chapters, either with current issues or self-experience to connect theory to actual practice. This method is highly endorsed by our student cohort in their positive feedback in the questionnaires. Ultimately, this leads to better students' understanding of the subject matter, where students are able to apply their knowledge comfortably by various means of assessments, including tutorials and quizzes. Students have also enjoyed brainstorming and peer learning sessions, as well as group discussion, where they were able to refresh what they have learnt. Surprisingly, 14% of the students appreciated the importance of having an adequate amount of homework and quizzes as a measure of their aptitude for a subject.

The 5th most important sub code, which is the only classroom management sub code in the top six priorities, is to manage impromptu incident with specific students. Both lecturers and students agreed that it is important for a learning environment to be uninterrupted. A student in our cohort expressed difficulty in learning when the class was noisy. Thus, a lecturer ought to control or manage any unforeseen events taking place in classrooms in order to minimize the disturbance. One of our lecturers managed to divert a group of hyperactive students in her class to take leads in group discussion and presentations, which exploited their personalities as strengths instead of weaknesses. As a result, the teacher has tactfully controlled the classroom and elevated a positive learning environment amongst the students via relevant activities in the class.

The 6th criterion for effective teaching and learning ranked by the lecturers is the ability to achieve standards and objectives. This is another criterion with a large gap between what has been done and what is expected. Students felt that effective teaching and learning has taken place if the teacher could achieve good passing rate and high numbers of 'A' scorers. This is understandable as these achievements are tangible and is frequently a preliminary indicator of how proficient a teacher is. Also, the main aim of the students in this college is to do well and to proceed to the next phase in their lives.

Sub Codes That Are Less Prioritised, Are They Not Important?

4 out of 5 classroom management sub codes were ranked in the bottom 5 criteria for effective teaching and learning. Although this contradicts the expectations and findings from literature reviews, a very interesting conclusion can be drawn by looking at the *p* values. On the surface, effective classroom management is ranked lower than effective teaching instructions amongst the two groups but the more important question is to identify whether there is a significant difference between what the teachers and the students thought of this area. Referring to Table 3, it is clear that when the independent groups *t*-test was performed on each sub code, all the classroom management sub codes had a *p*-value of less than 0.05. This means that there is a significant difference between the lecturers' and students' point of view on classroom management. Whilst the lecturers ranked classroom management as less important than effective instructions, students obviously thought otherwise. This is a critical finding and is in line with most literatures, advocating proper classroom management before effective teaching and learning can take place.

60 out of 90 students' surveys focused on poor classroom management when asked to elaborate on areas of improvements for effective teaching and learning. Of the 60 surveys which focused on classroom management, a whopping 90% felt that improvements can be made to the classroom climate for teaching and learning to be effective. Two key words, which are 'interaction' and 'boring' consistently, emerged from the survey forms as areas for improvements. These two words highlight the primary need of the students, which is to be able to connect to the teacher for a healthy classroom climate. Examples of such comments are:

"A good teacher will create a comfortable learning atmosphere in the class so that the class is not so dull."

"Tutorials are taught like lectures (without two way communication)"

"More interaction is needed between teachers and students. Please do not only read from the slides."

"Control the environment so that the class atmosphere is conducive."

"Teaching and learning without communication and interaction is not the way to go"

"The teacher allows students to talk too much nonsense in class. This annoys the others."

"The teacher is unable to handle the class when it is noisy and he does not prepare enough on the subjects."

Evidently, a positive and healthy classroom climate is more important than placing a highly qualified teacher in the classrooms. A healthy classroom climate is much sought after by students as this is a driving force to effective teaching and learning. Furthermore, it is also interesting to note that an environment conducive to learning does not necessarily mean a friendly environment; it could be an environment where discipline is of priority or a competitive environment where students pit against each other. This means that students are not looking for a teacher who is always pleasant, but one who interacts with them, is empathetic, passionate and respectful. This is the very essence of good classroom management and with proper classroom climate, effective teaching and learning can take place.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis of the teachers' perception of effective teaching and learning led to four interrelated conclusions. First, the majority of the teachers were not focused on classroom management but rather highlighted teaching instructions when describing effective and ineffective experiences. A higher percentage of students focused on classroom management aspects. Second, 5 out of 6 teaching criteria were ranked as more important compared to classroom management by the teachers and students but the *t*-test shows that there is a significant difference in opinions between students and lecturers in the classroom management criteria. Third, although classroom management sub codes were ranked lowest amongst the lecturers and students, the open ended surveys have clearly indicated that students want these aspects to be addressed more aggressively by the lecturers to improve the effectiveness of teaching and learning. Fourthly, experienced lecturers demonstrated their understanding of effective teaching and learning by making classroom management a priority compared to their lesser counterparts.

We could not emphasize more on how important classroom management is. Issues of behaviour and discipline have long been reported as consistent sources of teacher stress (AEU BT Survey, 2007). In line with this study, teacher training should focus on helping teachers cope with the multi-faceted aspects of classroom management. This training will prepare them to meet the ever rising challenges of managing the behaviours of Y generation students. Without a solid core of behavioural support in the classroom, students do not have the guide posts necessary to learn, practise and develop desirable skills (Sayeski and Brown, 2011).

Being reflective practitioners, experienced teachers may be in the key position to help novice teachers realign their priorities to ensure effective teaching and learning. The aim is not simply to encourage reflection, but to help novice teachers to consider the outcomes of their practice, question implication for student learning and propose ways to improve their classroom management practices to induce a positive learning environment (Schulz & Mandzuk, 2005).

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