

TEACHING THEORY AND PRACTICES – A PRE-UNIVERSITY TEACHER’S DILEMMA

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ABSTRACT

This study was aimed to investigate the application of teaching and learning theories that were applied during the teaching and learning process. There are many teaching theories that advocates that the best learning technique is student-based or student-centred learning. Selected teachers were interviewed based on their teaching experience and education background. Three main groups of teachers were studied; those who had more than 20 years of teaching experience, those who had between ten to twenty years teaching experience and those with less than ten years. The Pre-University programmes chosen were those with at least fifty percent external examination component such as A-levels, Mufy and the Ausmat. This article is written based on the teachers’ experiences and the problems that arise as they tried to apply the teaching and learning theories that were taught during their training as a teacher.

Keywords: Teaching theory and practices, Pre-University teacher dilemma.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching well means helping students learn well. Every schoolteacher operates according to a theory or theories of learning and within the context of a philosophy of what education should fundamentally be about. The only difference is that sometimes these theories are very consciously held and operated upon by the teacher, perhaps carefully referenced to published theory in the field, while others are held rather less consciously, with perhaps little or no reference to published theory (Moore, 2000).

The traditional image of a teacher is someone who enlightens students on what to learn and encourages them to learn and rehearse what they have been taught. It has been these teachers who have mediated knowledge to children and adult learners alike. However, much of these have changed now and teachers no longer:

- have a monopoly on transmitting knowledge
- determine or legislate on matters of knowledge although they may be interpreters of different systems of knowledge
- deal with truth but they certainly teach truths
- teach with unchanging knowledge, but now they deal with scientific knowledge which is rapidly advancing
- teach only theoretical knowledge, but now they also help learners acquire practical knowledge

- can assume that their learners know nothing about the subjects that they teach, but must learn to build on knowledge acquired by their learners from a wide variety of sources (Jarvis, 2006).

In addition, with the mode of delivery changing as the learning market develops, so it is no longer only an inter-personal activity- now it might be mediating knowledge through the written script, through the spoken word on audio tape and even interactive electronic systems. As education seeks to respond to demands of the market, so teaching is forced to change to produce in the most efficient way the learning packages that will be useful to the work situation or socio-cultural condition (Jarvis, 2006).

A great deal of emphasis in contemporary education has been on learning and the learner, although concerns about teaching have begun to surface. Some of the recommendations of the Dearing Committee's report (1997) include the following:

We recommend that, with immediate effect, all institutions of higher education give high priority to developing and implementing learning and teaching strategies which focus on the promotion of the students' learning. (Recommendation 8).

We recommend that institutions of higher education begin immediately to develop or seek access to programmes for teacher training of the staff, if they do not have them and seek national accreditation from the Institute for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. (Recommendation 13).

MODELS OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

Models of teaching are designed to impart these strategies while helping students develop as persons, increase their capacity to think clearly and wisely, and building social skills and commitment (Joyce et. al, 1992).

Lecture Method

Teaching methods include lectures. Lecturing and teaching are both activities associated with the system of formal education; and of all the didactic methods of teaching, the classroom lecturing is the most obvious. It puts the lecturer in complete control of the learning situation, and seemingly cast the learner in the passive role (Griffin, 2006).

Socratic Method of Teaching

Socratic method of teaching involves leading the learner in a series of questioning process until the final objective is achieved. Such relatively open and non-authoritarian methods often lead to discussion and inquiry, but take more time which is often of the essence to many teachers as they strive to cover the syllabus (Jarvis, 2006). The main factors influencing the method of teaching are the internal cultural environment, the social and

psychological contract, the wider culture, institutional and environmental conditions, the facilitator style and the model of facilitation (Gregory, 2006).

Experiential Teaching and Learning

The theoretical principles of experiential teaching and learning show that it has its genesis in the philosophy of progressive and emancipatory adult education. This type of learning is holistic and actively embraces all four functions of thinking, feeling, intuition and sensing which enables us to be in contact with our environment, and the acquisition of knowledge (Gregory, 2006). It seems to be a very effective method in adult and open learning systems.

Practice-based and Problem-based Learning

Practice-based and problem-based learning are teaching methods which use certain forms of self-directed and group learning in order to enable individuals and groups to learn in practice situations. Practice-based learning is used in apprenticeship systems and practice placements during training, and the latter has gained popularity as a result of its innovations introduced in health sciences education at the McMaster University in Canada. This method has also gained popularity in some medical schools although some reported that these approaches are insufficient by themselves (Jarvis, 2006).

Mentoring as a Teaching method

Mentoring as a guidance method has been linked to the field of teacher education and in the health service sector. Merriam (1983) stated that mentoring appears to mean different things to different people including developmental psychologists, businessmen and academics.

PRE-UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

Pre-University education in Malaysia is a bridge between schools, where students undergo eleven years of primary and secondary education, and the university where they complete their tertiary education. There are many available courses for students intending to do a pre-university study. The government of Malaysia provides the STPM (Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia) and local matriculation courses. On the other hand, the private sector makes available numerous pre-university courses such as the GCE A-Levels offered by both Cambridge International Examinations (CIE) and the Edexcel from the United Kingdom, the Australian Year 12 offered as South Australian Matriculation (SAM) and Western Australian Matriculation (AUSMAT), and the Canadian Secondary School Diploma offered by the Ontario Ministry of Education, generally known as CIMP. Foundation programmes of foreign universities are also available such as the Monash University Foundation Year (MUFY), the University of New South Wales (UNSW) Foundation and finally the foundation programmes of local private higher education

institutions (PHEI) such as the Foundation in Arts, Foundation in Science or the Foundation in Medicine.

In order to better understand teachers' perception and understanding of the application of teaching theories in their everyday teaching and the problems associated with it in real-life applications, an interview-based study was initiated. The PHEI chosen for this study has a range of programmes including pre-university courses from the United Kingdom, Australia and Canada; a matriculation course from Monash University and its own foundation programme.

Methodology

1. Procedure

The study was conducted in a PHEI recognised by the government of Malaysia and has both degree and pre-university programmes. The pre-university programmes includes three that have significant external examinable contents; these being Cambridge GCE-A Levels, AUSMAT and MUFY which have 100 %, 50% and 50-70% external examinable contents respectively depending on subject. The total pre-university student population is in the region of four thousand at any time and the lecturer or teacher population is in the region of one hundred and thirty.

2. Sample

The sample consisted of lecturers from the three programmes that have a significant external examinable content. Some lecturers were rejected as the answers were not rich in text and further probing was met with stone-wall silence or refusal. The respondents were initially asked to fill up a basic questionnaire about their teaching background and teaching practice; followed by an interview to amplify their responses. The main questions asked were as follows:

- Whether they applied any of the five models of teaching and learning as discussed in the introduction above, and the problems associated with them
- Their philosophy of teaching
- Their own method or style of teaching

The above responses were further grouped into four categories based on the teaching experience of the respondents. These are:

- a. Respondents with below two years of teaching experience
- b. Respondents with between two to five years of teaching experience
- c. Respondents with between six to nineteen years of teaching experience
- d. Respondents with above nineteen years of teaching experience

This will throw light on the influence of teaching experience on the type of response provided.

Results and Discussion

The findings of the study are summarised and presented in the following sections based on the teachers' perceptions.

1. Application of Teaching Theories and the Problems Associated with them

Most teachers agreed that teaching theories would probably be important as research has been conducted to come up with these theories. Participants from category (a) claimed to use all teaching theories available, whereas participants from category (b) used them mainly for facilitation and problem-based learning.

I use lectures to introduce concepts and theories. My students are learning new things as I guide them by questioning. The tutorial questions will have them working in groups and these facilitate as well as strengthen their knowledge of the subject matter that we were discussing. (A participant of category a).

Students give presentations, followed by a series of question and answer from fellow students. This develops teamwork among students. The questions I give as homework will facilitate learning and ensure the understanding of subject matter. (A participant of category b).

Participants from categories (c) and (d) seem sceptical about teaching theories. They argued that classroom setting was very different from research as the respondents might want to give "correct" answers instead of "honest" answers. Some argued that the research might have been based on a different cultural setting and is therefore not applicable here.

All teaching theories are just that, theories. I hardly use any of these. Based on my experience I will decide what method to use. A different batch of students will require a different style. Who cares about theories? As long as my students "get it" I have done what I set out to do. Real classroom situation is very different from research conditions. Students behave differently with different teachers. Get them to your side and they will move "heaven and earth" for you. (A participant of category c).

The above participant's perception was unique as he believed that the charisma of the teacher was more important than the teaching process. He stated that it was from his experience. As a new teacher he tried the teaching techniques that he learnt but he found that his students responded to a charismatic teacher rather than a teacher with multiple techniques.

The next participant from category (d) has more than thirty years of teaching experience, his ideas were different as he was not sure whether he remembered any theories mentioned due to the lack of refresher course, but believed that they were not important.

I do not actually know whether I use any of the teaching theories that you mentioned. My many years of teaching including those in schools, I never worried about theories. Only during the first few years after my Diploma in Education, I tried to use the theories learnt. But as I gained experience, my students taught me to think on my feet; after that all theories went into thin air. (A participant of category d).

Some participants were sceptical as to whether these theories were suitable for their particular programme as the syllabus and course structure were designed to be taught in a certain time frame. This, they argued, “disallows” the teachers liberty to try different methods as completing the syllabus in time for examination is of the utmost importance. Some participants claimed to have tried using theories with success whereas others have dismal results. The participants fear being labelled “ineffective” if they continue to experiment with teaching theories, as after all, the final examination results and grades will reflect on their “ability” as a teacher.

2. Teaching Philosophy

The inexperienced teachers (participants of category a) were not able to articulate their teaching philosophy. They have no comment or replied that they were not “ready yet” to have a philosophy. The more experienced participants all have their own philosophy, which ranged from a few words to a long paragraph. Some quotes are given below.

To ensure that her students not only learn, but also how to learn more (A participant of category b)

The participant explained that her philosophy is that as her students learn some concepts and theories from her, they should then have the ability to apply these concepts in any given situations.

To ensure the students better their best (A participant of category c)

This participant explained that the students that finished her course should have at least obtained a better grade than what they came into the course with. Her philosophy is that the output is of the utmost importance and her philosophy is to ensure her students produce their best. It may have been due to the fact that she is teaching in the A-Levels where the examination grades are based solely on external examinations.

We are a bridge that helps the students cross the hurdle. (A participant of category d)

This participant explained that his students must get to the university where they want. He emphasised that the pre-university programme is a final bridge to overcome the hurdle. He believes that as a teacher the job is not complete if his students do not get the university of their choice.

3. Teaching Methods

The general census of all teachers is that any method is applicable as long as the students obtain maximum benefit. The less experienced teachers of category (a) generally try to use all theories learnt but as the participants' teaching experience increases the use of teaching theories seems to be less important compared to the teachers' perception of the method to be used.

4. The Dilemma

- *As a teacher do we teach for the examination results? The output is our ultimate goal not the process.*
- *Do we teach so that the learning process occurs? The examination results (output) are not our ultimate concern but the process.*

Most teachers interviewed replied affirmatively to the first statement while the less experienced teachers were reluctant to comment. When pressed further they stated that they were scared to give a "wrong" answer. When explained that there was no "correct" answer they agreed with the first statement. The more experienced teachers argued that for the students' goals to be achieved, the final marks or grade is important, not what they have learned. When probed further, the general answer is that the learning can be done at the university level. It was argued that if the student did not get into the university then all the "learning" achieved is of little importance. A respondent from category (d) stated the following:

I have failed as a teacher if I am not able to send my student to the university that he or she wants or the best that he can go to. I am willing to forgo the process of teaching and concentrate on the output if that is what it takes.

5. What are Pre-university Teachers? Are they Lecturers? Teachers? Managers? or Counsellors?

The general census is that a pre-university lecturer has many hats to wear. The hat changes with the situation that the teacher is in. He has to be a teacher, lecturer and manager while in class whereas the counsellor role comes after class or during remedial classes for the weaker students. The teachers' and lecturers' roles come during the academic discourse. The individual also has to manage up to forty students with different needs and abilities at the same time. This is where the management skills come in handy. A badly managed classroom is not conducive for the learning process whereas a well managed class is very conducive for the teaching and learning process.

SUMMARY

Generally, the teachers felt that the output (the final result or grade) is more important than the process of teaching and learning. These could be due to the fact that the respondents were mainly from programmes that were based on an external examination results.

The experienced teachers were not very concerned about the teaching theories. These teachers could have reflected on their teaching methods and theories, but found them unsuitable for application in their situation. Does this mean that the teacher's perception is more important than the teaching theories or is it that they have forgotten their theories?

A pre-university teacher has many roles to play in a classroom; a teacher, a lecturer, manager and finally that of a counsellor. The role the teacher has to play would depend on the teachers' experience and the audience at that instant.

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