Developments in Teaching, Learning and Assessment Practices in Higher Education: A Self Explanatory Approach

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Abstract  
This paper addresses the issues of teaching, learning and assessment in higher education. By adopting a reflective approach, these issues are discussed and analyzed with reference to author’s own experience in the higher education as well as with reference to the recent developments which are outcomes of the research into the issue. It is noted that higher education has experienced significant developments over the recent years. These developments have also brought reciprocal developments in the areas of teaching, learning and assessment. It is suggested that to cope with the challenge of these developments, a reflective, scholarly and research informed approach is required.

Key Words:  Teaching, Learning, Assessment, PBL, Reflective Approach, Higher Education, Participative Assessment, Learner-Centered

I. Introduction  
This descriptive paper addresses the important issue of learning, teaching and assessment in higher education. The issue is rich and there exists voluminous literature making it possible to write a dissertation on it. This paper, therefore, focuses on the recent theories and concepts including problem based learning (PBL hereafter) reflective approach, learner-centered approach, participative assessment and other recent relevant approaches to learning, teaching and assessment in higher education.

The discussion does address and takes into account the importance of scholarly and research informed approach to the issue. Where appropriate during the discussion, a reflective approach is followed by relating a particular issue or concept to author’s own experience of teaching, learning and assessment in the higher education. As author’s background and teaching interests rest in accounting and business, the reflective analysis and other inferences made in this paper will therefore be with reference to aforementioned disciplines.

II. The Changing Nature of Higher Education Environment  
The teaching-learning in higher education is currently undergoing an important phase. It is facing challenges that it never faced before. These include increasing number of students, diverse background of students, use of technology, assessment, globalization, e-learning, business facing and corporate style management. During the recently attended Continuing Professional & Academic Development (CPAD) course at the University of Hertfordshire, the participants, all of them were lecturers in higher education, were asked to think of the challenges that higher education is currently facing. The outcome was
amazing. The participants came up with a long list of challenges and the facilitator agreed that all of challenges on the list are realistic and that a case can easily be made for each of them. This obviously puts extra pressure and responsibility on the shoulders of those responsible for policy decisions but also those who are part of the teaching-learning process in higher education. These rapid changes in educational environment have serious implications for the teaching and the goals that teaching aims to achieve. In wake of this, it is even criticized that the universities don’t know what is meant to be a university (see for example Barnett, 2000).

The teaching goals are often described in a way that they are end in themselves. In most of the cases, these goals are merely path of achieving some other ends. Teaching has often been labeled as a transformation process that doesn’t contain only the transfer of knowledge but also continuous development of the participants. A vast literature is written to understand and describe this process. Some of the popular approaches include experiential learning, learner-managed learning, student-centered learning, autonomous learner and personal development planning. The universities are becoming more committed towards the continuous personal development of their staff and to particularly those newly appointed. This shift in approach is relatively new that the teachers in the higher education need training and help on how to teach.

The importance of the teaching-learning process is well established. It is not unusual for educational institutions to claim that they provide excellent or high quality teaching and learning (Andrea and Gosling, 2005). However, not many understand what is meant by excellent or high quality teaching and learning and in what environment this can be provided. However, the importance of assessment is perhaps undermined. There is a strong body of literature emerging of late focusing primarily on assessment and the assertion is growing in popularity that assessment is one of the major drivers of the teaching-learning process. It is even suggested that assessment will determine the way in which teaching-learning process takes place. There is also an emerging theory that calls for learning through assessing – an approach where learner assess themselves and learn from the process (see for example Race, 1995).

III. Teaching in Higher Education

Ramsden (1992) states that many teachers in higher education implicitly or explicitly define teaching undergraduates as merely the transmission of contents or demonstration of the process (described as Theory 1: teaching as telling or transmission). Ramsden further states that some teachers see teaching as a supervision process involving the articulation of techniques designed to ensure that students complete the task set upon them and learn (described as Theory 2: teaching as organizing student activity). Whereas Theory 1 and 2 focus on the teacher and the student, Theory 3 describes teaching and learning as two sides of a coin. According to theory 3, teaching, students and the subject contents to be learned are linked together by an overarching framework or system. Under this approach, teachers work closely with students and help them learn. Ramsden (1997) presents a model of teaching in higher education (see Figure 1 on the next page). Ramsden suggests that this model is a useful tool to make some predictions about the effects of different evaluation procedures and training programmes on the quality of lecturers’ teaching, in a similar way to the projections concerning the outcomes and process of student learning that can be derived.
Reflection or reflective approach is another concept that is widely argued as equally important for both students and teachers for their progress. Brockbank and McGill (2007) state that the term reflection is used in two senses. First, as a process or means by which an experience, feeling or action is brought into consideration. Second, as creation of meaning and conceptualization from experience and the potentiality to look at things as other than what they are. Brown et al. (2007) suggest that reflection has a central role to play in transforming new experiences into understanding and knowledge. It is emphasized that teachers in higher education should endeavor to become active reflective practitioners. Biggs (1988) suggests:

*Reflective activity, through a process of interpretation and integration, translates lower-order inputs to higher-order knowledge.* (p. 190)

Although reflective approach is not without criticism, the benefit to be gained from reflective practice is regarded as an important source of reflective learning. It is suggested that an experienced reflective practitioner will be able to adapt their teaching approach to assist the bringing about of successful outcomes in their students (Brown et al. 2007). It is not the case that a teacher will always exhibit his/her favourite style of teaching. The more a teacher is aware of the characteristics of various teaching styles, the more effective he or she will be in supporting learning for students. Entwistle (1988) is among many other who attempted to classify particular styles or types of teaching to particular practices or behaviours. Entwistle suggests a four style model with four postulated styles of teaching and their suggested behaviour. This has been presented in Table 1.

If a lecturer of accounting and business reflects on his or her experience of teaching in higher education, Entwistle’s model is a useful tool. When setting an assignment for says year 3 accounting students, we are knowingly or unknowingly adapting all four styles. Let us suppose that the assignment is about financial analysis using ratios for a company over a 5 years period. We are following Style 2 when we want students to present their reports using a certain standard format and by certain deadline. We are following Style 3 when we encourage students to use their own personal experiences and expressions in interpreting and discussing ratios. We are following Style 4 when we develop reliable assessment strategies to mark the assignments. And finally, we are following Style 1 when we develop strategies to handle and accommodate the different learning needs in students groups. It is suggested that learning styles can assist
teachers understand students’ problems and identify and adopt teaching strategies to support students (Brown et al. 2007).

Table 1. Four Styles of Teaching and Their Suggested Behaviours (Entwistle, 1988)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Style 1: Do I…</th>
<th>Style 2: Do I…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Challenge students to move beyond existing knowledge;</td>
<td>Emphasize practical learning;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value students’ originality;</td>
<td>Provide structured tasks with detailed directions;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster creativity by introducing new resources and activities;</td>
<td>Encourage concise, ordered formats and outcomes;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private a ‘stimulus rich’ environment;</td>
<td>Foster creativity through photo types and replicas;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work with big ideas with no standard structure or format;</td>
<td>Cover content in detail;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set open ended tasks?</td>
<td>Set clear tasks;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finish on time?</td>
<td>Finish on time?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Style 3: Do I…
- Encourage students’ personal expression and imagination;
- Give praise generously;
- Enjoy change and variety;
- Promote cooperative tasks;
- Create an unstructured, friendly environment;
- Develop content through a variety of media including artistic, aesthetic or literary?

Style 4: Do I…
- Emphasize ideas, concepts, theories;
- Analyse and evaluate ideas;
- Want students to have a bank of knowledge;
- Have consistent and reliable rules and procedures;
- Dislike distraction;
- Rely on logical reasoning; need time to think through ideas and organize programmes?

IV. Learning in Higher Education

Although it is stated above that the importance of teaching-learning process is well established, however, learning is still an issue which despite many years of research into it lacks conceptual agreement on it. It is impossible to claim that a lecturer understands the learning needs of almost all of his/her students as individuals have different learning needs and learning styles (Fry et al. 2007). In year 1 module of accounting and finance, for example, the average class size is 250 to 300 students as this is a compulsory common module across various disciplines of a say UK university. Almost 60% to 70% of those sitting in the class either have no prior background in accounting or if they have, it is very basic. The remaining 30% to 40% do have some reasonable background in accounting. Now the question arises how the lecturer should deal with the learning needs of these two diverse groups. An experienced lecturer may well be able to cope with this situation on the basis of his/her ‘experiential learning’. How about a young and relatively inexperienced lecturer?

Kolb Learning Cycle

When a new lecturer looks at his or her relatively short experience of handling this situation, S/he may find Kolb Learning Cycle a useful model. The model requires four kinds of abilities to make learning successful. These abilities are shown in Figure 2. It is important to note that all four abilities must exist for effective learning to take place.
Concrete Experience (CE)  
Active Experimentation (AE)  
Reflective Observation  
Abstract Conceptualization (AC)

**Figure 2  Kolb Learning Cycle (adopted from Kolb, 1984)**

The Figure 2 contains terms that have important meanings for learning and teaching in higher education. The concrete experience (CE) requires the learners to be fully and freely involved in the experience; reflective observation (RO) requires availability of time and space to be able to reflect; abstract conceptualization (AC) requires learners to be able to form, reform and process their ideas and be able to convert them into logical theories; and finally active experimentation (AE) requires learners to make decisions and solve problems using understanding from the entire cycle and this process continues. Again, it is important that all four stages must be achieved for effective learning.

This model has serious implications and fits well in business and accounting education where what students do is more important than what the teachers do. Biggs (1999) makes an important point when he states that the accumulation of knowledge and information is important but what is more important is how students use and process the information set to make decisions to solve problems. Business and accounting education is all about understanding and solving problems. Becher (1989) classifies social sciences in the second quadrant of his classification of academic knowledge model (known as Kolb-Biglan Model). This quadrant is combination of Concrete Experience (CE) and Reflective Observation (RO) as noted above in the Kolb’s learning cycle. Becher has given this a common name of Concrete Reflective. Those who teach these subjects will agree that the Concrete Reflective approach in accounting and business education is a relevant and useful approach. As lecturers, we feel that the onus is ours to create opportunities and environment where individuals learn according to their preferred learning style.

**Learner-Centered Approach in Learning**

Ashwin (2006) provides a thorough and useful account of changes in the systems and structures of higher education in the UK. While examining the developments in learning and teaching in the higher education, Ashwin notes that one of the major changes has been the advent of what is called ‘learner-centered’ approach or learning and teaching from the students’ perspectives. Boud (2006) writes on this issue:

'It is often remarked that one of the major changes in higher education over the second half of the twentieth century is that it has become more
learner-centre. Indeed in the literature of teaching and learning a focus on the learner is so taken for granted that is decreasingly commented on’. (p. 19)

This approach however is subject to contradictory meanings. In this context, Ashwin (2006) further notes the growing popularity of ‘participative assessment’ where students actually take part in assessment of their work.

**Blended Learning**

Another area that has become a widespread part of higher education is the development of learning technologies. Blended learning and e-learning are now the part and parcel of higher education and it is suggested that the rapid development of technologies has presented unseen opportunities for the development of learning and teaching. An important thing is that these technologies are driven by the needs of learners (see for example Laurillard, 2006). The extent of use of technology in higher education, however, is a debatable issue. In author’s view some institutions are over reliant on the use of technology in teaching and learning process. There is little argument that technology plays a vital part in communication and interactions between teachers and learners but if this is a better substitute for traditional learning methods is still unproven.

**Problem Based Learning (PBL)**

An important learning approach is problem-based learning (PBL hereafter) which has often been described as the most important innovation in teaching and education over the years (Boud and Feletti, 1997). This approach is in contrast to the traditional teacher-centered approach where the teacher determines the contents and the knowledge to be gained. In PBL, students or participants actively engage in determining the contents and knowledge to be acquired. The PBL can better be explained with Figure 3 that is based on Silen’s (2001) model.

![Figure 3 Problem Based Learning (PBL) Model (Based on Silen, 2001)](image-url)
Hommes (1998) describes PBL approach as follows:

‘In practice, PBL works as follows: a collection of carefully constructed problem is presented to small groups of students (average 8-12 students). These problems usually consist of description of a set of observable phenomena or events that are in need of some kind of explanation (this refers to trigger in the above mode). The task of the groups is to discuss these problems and produce tentative explanations for the phenomena, described in terms of some underlying process, principles or mechanism. In addition, students may be required to formulate questions, or propose a management plan, depending on the nature of the material presented to them. Essential to the method is that students’ prior knowledge of the problem is, in itself, insufficient to understand it in depth....References, audio-visual aid, occasional lectures, and skills training are included as learning resources relevant to the understanding of problems. (P. 102)

Boud and Feletti (1998) discuss the following features as the fundamental characteristics of the PBL approach in higher education:

i) Using stimulus material to help students discuss an important problem, question or issue;
ii) Presenting the problem as a simulation of professional practice or a ‘real life’ situation;
iii) Appropriately guiding students’ critical thinking and providing limited resources to help them learn from defining and attempting to resolve the given problem;
iv) Having students work cooperatively as a group, exploring information in and out for the class, with access to a tutor (not necessarily a subject specialist) who knows the problem well and can facilitate the group’s learning process;
v) Getting students to identify their own learning needs and appropriate use of available resources;
vii) Reapplying this new knowledge to the original problem and evaluating their learning processes.

The PBL approach has long been used in business and management in the form of case studies which can be called an earlier ‘proto form’ of PBL (Gilbert and Foster, 1997). The popular ‘Harvard Case Study Method’ is a notable example. Gilbert and Foster (1997) discuss the application of PBL in University of Maastricht and approach used is more or less similar to the six steps discussed above. In accounting, PBL approach has been regularly used but in the weak form. The assignments and coursework focusing on financial analysis, ratios analysis, trend finding etc are actually PBL but more structured and controlled.

V. Assessment in Higher Education

The assessment of students’ learning is perhaps the most important and at the same time under researched issue in higher education (Wakeford, 2007). Sally Brown is a well
known researcher and writer on assessment. She writes in a short article published on the website of London Metropolitan University in 1996:

> ‘My passion in life is assessment. I write books and articles on it, run workshops in my own university and around the world on the subject, I speak on assessment at conferences and often spend most of y waking hours thinking about it. I even dream about assessment issues occasionally’
> (www.city.londonmet.ac.uk/deliberations/assessment/invite.htm.)

The importance of the above statement need not to be undermined as assessment systems in universities and colleges in the UK as well as in many other countries have changed and Sally’s efforts in this respect are prominent and commendable. There has long been a criticism on the traditional assessment methods which are dominated by the teachers and institutions. Reynolds and Trehan (2000) stress that if the primary function of assessment is to either award or withhold a qualification; this will make it a primary location for power relations. Lewis Elton is a well known critic of dominant assessment practices in the higher education. Elton and Johnston (2002) write:

> ‘Traditional assessment practices, consisting pre-eminently of the assessment of essay and problem type final examinations and similarly constructed coursework, cannot adequately test for imponderables like independent critical thinking, creativity etc. and this is particularly so for time limited examinations’. (P. 7)

As mentioned earlier, the ‘learner-centered’ learning has led to the introduction of ‘participative assessment’. It is suggested that importance of assessment should be gauged from what is learners’ experience of assessment as this is likely to influence the learning outcomes (Boud, 2006). Many of us would have also experienced the growth of assessment methods in accounting and business which are more participative compared to the assessment methods a few years ago. The making of charts, assignments focusing on development of financial and business strategies, unstructured coursework, open books exams, in-class tests, online testing systems are only few examples where one can see practice of ‘learner-centered’ learning and ‘participative assessment’.

The assessment may be *formative* or *summative*. The former is an informal assessment and the later is formal where the decision about student’s progress and grades are made. In higher business education, we do normally practice both obviously the summative one is mandatory. The examples of formative assessment includes quizzes, role playing, interpretation of ratios, case studies etc. where students’ performance doesn’t make part of grades. It, however, does have positive effects on students learning. As far as assessment methods are concerned a separate paper can be written on them. Race (1995) provides a useful account of the advantages and disadvantages of various assessment methods including traditional exams, open book exams, structured exams, essays, reviews, reports, practical work, portfolios, presentations and viva etc. With the exception of few in the list, it is common to have experienced using these assessment methods and found them useful and relevant for both formative and summative assessments. Wakeford (2007) makes an interesting point about defending
assessment decisions. He argues that although the situation is not critical as yet, however, this is about the right time to start thinking about it if the case laws allow students to challenge assessment decision on the wider scale. We all have already experienced movements into this direction. The module guides now contains detailed, relevant and useful information about assessment including assessment detail, matching assessment with intended learning outcomes, assessment weighting, marking scheme and grading details.

VI. Summary and Conclusion

It is a commonplace that higher education around the world has undergone and is still undergoing major developments. The issues of teaching, learning and assessment have been under intense scrutiny of late resulting in calls to make teaching, learning and assessment more relevant, reliable and useful in achieving objectives of higher education. In this paper, some of the popular and latest concepts and approaches in higher education are reviewed and discussed. It is noted that both teaching-learning process as well as assessment are facing challenges that they never faced before.

The higher education institutions are investing and emphasizing on continuous development and learning of their new and existing staff to meet these challenges. It is particularly important for universities to do so in the wake of intense competition and where the new approaches in learning, teaching and assessment are taking measures of the traditional approaches. To be successful, a reflective, scholarly and research informed approach is the way forward.

References


