FACILITATE OR SINK?

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Abstract

This article is based on reviewing literature as well as experiences in the fields of Radiography and Biochemistry. Major changes have occurred in the Higher Education environment over the recent past. The concept of learner-centeredness emerged with the implementation of OBET. Adaptations to traditional teaching methods will be necessary to prevent lowering of standards in teaching and learning. Mass-lecture, multiple choice questions and using the marking machine has so far been the response from the academe, thus very little deep, meaningful learning is taking place. Good facilitation should narrow the gap caused by student diversity. Facilitating improved learning requires a great deal of professional development as a facilitator. The learning process should strive to attain learning through a deep approach addressing the specific needs of the learners. To assist you to effectively facilitate learning, the article addresses some factors associated with academic achievement. Practical examples are also provided to facilitate effective learning in the classroom. The philosophy driving a good facilitator is also expounded. It is concluded that an excellent facilitator will not only make effort, but will make waves in facilitating his/her subject.

Keywords: Learner-centeredness, facilitating, diversity, standards, resources, responsibility, reflection

1. INTRODUCTION - FROM FRAGMENTED LEARNING TO THE BIG PICTURE

The days for traditional lectures and tutorials are a thing of the past. Restructuring, re-financing and expansion of Higher Education has brought about classes of increased size and diversity, student ability, motivation and cultural backgrounds. These changes are a worldwide phenomenon. With outcomes-based education and training (OBET) as one of the new trends of education in South Africa, the notion of learner-centeredness emerged. Learner-centeredness refers to concepts such as active learning, self-directed learning and autonomous learning (Pillay, 2002). This means that learners should be central to the design and delivery of instruction. It implies a process of facilitation whereby learners are engaged in active learning instead of passively being spoon-fed with pre-determined knowledge. Learner participation, however, often results in covering less material, yet learners will truly grasp fundamentals and have much more chance to clear up confusion when learning is properly facilitated. Thus, the increase in class size as well as the increased diversity of students necessitates active facilitation or our learning system may sink! Furthermore, learning does not have the same meaning for all learners. Learners' perceptions of what is useful in a learning task are shaped by a number of factors. These factors include their informal and formal conception and beliefs about the nature of knowledge, the learning process, the context, prior knowledge and experiences.

Our experience, supported by literature, indicate the following factors as having a major influence on the paradigm shift from teaching to facilitation, in the fields of Radiography and Biochemistry.

2. THE NEW LEARNING CONTEXT

Economic and managerial considerations are playing an increasingly important role in teaching and learning, and decision making in Higher Education, even to the extent where undergraduate courses tend to more and more follow commercial market trends. This all tends to categorize academic staff into two groups: one group, working mostly under contract and trying very hard to please their masters, usually the younger fraternity; and a second group, usually older, teaching in a new and to them an unknown teaching environment. What both of these groups experience are that the diversing factors class size, fewer staff, new courses, etc. demand increased teaching skills. If adaptations to traditional teaching methods are not implemented all these factors seemingly suggest lower standards of teaching and learning. The whole situation also appears to indicate that many students currently at university should not be there but they are.

The response from the academe has thus far been to teach by mass-lecture and assess by short-cut methods like multiple choice questions and the marking machine. We agree, however, that the answer will most probably be found in taking a fresh look at the meaning of teaching. In the first place we should view the process of "teaching" more as facilitating the learning process and experience of learners. It is very relevant to remember that there is no all-purpose best method for this facilitation process. The system operating in a particular institution, the available resources, the student material, as well as the ability of the facilitators will all play a role in the complexity of this quest.

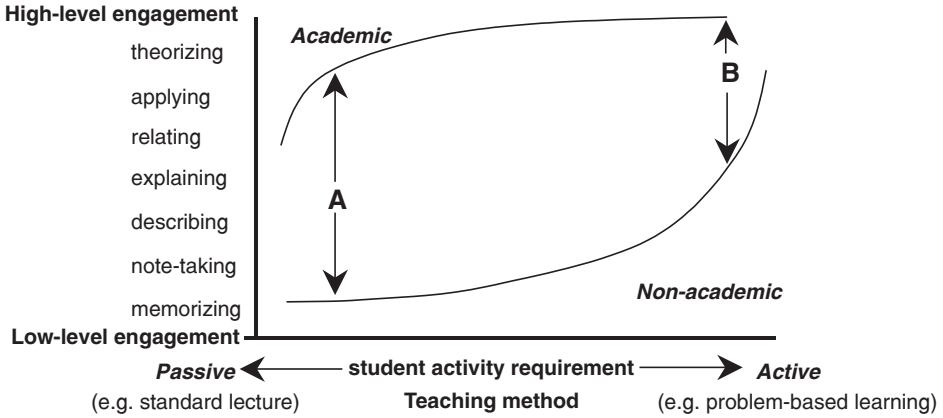
Lecturing as a method of teaching and transmitting information, however, has come under increasing criticism. The classic lecture has been defined as a process by which facts are sent out from the notebook of the facilitator to the notebook of the learner without passing through the minds of either. Lecturing, in the classical way, induces passivity of thought even in the best of students. They hurriedly take notes, but have little time to reflect on or question the material being jotted down. Thus, no significant deep, meaningful learning takes place where lectures are utilized in the old classic sense, but if modified somewhat, lectures can still be an effective way of delivering information in the overall learning process. It is, however, imperative to encourage learners to move beyond memorization of such information, rather using higher cognitive levels of analyzing and synthesizing ideas (Stanford University, 1993; What is the use of lectures?, 2005).

Facilitating improved learning, to the extent that most learners emerge as "academics" requires a great deal of professional development as a facilitator. Facilitators, developers and administrators need to work together to uplift and develop the teaching expertise so as to best unlock the body of didactic knowledge and integrate it with the body of content knowledge. We have found that improving facilitation is a personal thing and individual facilitators need to work out their own solutions. This requires reflection a theory of teaching to reflect with, as well as a context of experiences as the object of reflection. Expert facilitators continuously reflect on how they might improve their facilitation and the process of facilitation may be structured so that "action learning" can take place, in which possible solutions are carefully and continuously monitored to gauge success.

3. THE ROLE OF THE STUDENT

Student ability, attitude and motivation as well as student age have become increasingly diversified over the last years. More and more learners do not even study in the area of their first choice and they lack a well developed background of relevant knowledge, reading- and

writing skills. Quality learning takes place when the facilitator succeeds in getting most learners to use the higher cognitive level processes that the more academic learner uses spontaneously (Biggs, 2003). Furthermore, good facilitation should and will narrow the gap caused by learner diversity. Considering the variation required in addressing diverse cultural groups, a new learning approach needs to be designed to accommodate the needs of all learners. The design should align teaching to effective learning, learning outcomes and assessment activities. It is thus vital that facilitation of learning and the assessment thereof be conducted with precision and sensitivity. Moreover, learners should be guided to learn effectively for optimal progress. Analyze the two-dimensional graph engagement level and learning method for quality learning of "academic" versus "non-academic" learners.



(Biggs, 2003)

It is clear that appropriate learner activity, as part of the teaching method, can help to narrow the gap between the so-called academic learner and the non-academic one.

4. THE LEARNING PROCESS

The learning process should be constructed on and be the result of a learner's activities appropriate to achieving curriculum outcomes through a deep approach to learning. Through constructive alignment the teaching methods and methods of assessment should be aligned so that all aspects of the learning system support appropriate learning. Thus, facilitators need to succeed in getting learners to see the big picture.

There are a lot of options available for choice of design to facilitate learning in the OBET paradigm. The challenge is to ensure that the choice ultimately rests on the needs of the learners. To be able to assist you to effectively facilitate learning it is necessary to look at the factors associated with academic achievement:

- ***Cognitive ability:*** An attempt to enhance cognitive ability should include motivation through learners' active participation in the learning process. The majority of learners need more support in order to carry out higher level cognitive activities such as application and creative thinking. If the facilitation is appropriate, one should get the ordinary learner to do the sort of thing that better learners will be able to master with

only lecturing.

- ***Self-regulation:*** This is a process in which learners master their own acquisition of knowledge through self-observation, self-evaluation and self-reaction (Bandura, 1986). A self-regulated learning perspective shifts the focus of educational analyses from student learning abilities and environments to learners' personally initiated strategies designed to improve learning outcomes and environments (Zimmerman, 1990).
- ***Self-efficacy:*** It is a learner's belief about his/her performance capabilities in a specific context, task or domain (Zimmerman, 1987). Pintrich and De Groot (1990), found that higher levels of self-efficacy correlated with higher levels of self-regulation and hence improved academic achievement.
- ***Motivation:*** Increased motivation enhances effective learning. Motivation plays an essential role in academic competence and is thus a key element in academic performance (Linnenbrink and Pintrich, 2002). An enthusiastic facilitator, with an obvious passion for the subject he/she facilitates, is a very powerful motivator to encourage learners to take part in an effective learning process. Nothing impacts more negatively on the enthusiasm of a learner than a facilitator who is obviously not enjoying what he/she is doing and who is hurrying through the content just to get it finished.
- ***Approaches to learning:*** A deep approach to learning will positively correlate with academic achievement in contrast to a surface approach, which puts learners at risk of failing. A deep approach arises from a need to engage the task meaningfully, so the learner tries to use the most cognitive activities in handling it. Learners automatically focus on underlying meaning, on main ideas, themes, principles or successful applications. In comparison, the surface approach arises from an intention to get a task out of the way with minimum trouble. Low-cognitive-level activities are used when higher-level activities are required to do a task properly (Biggs, 2003).
- ***Effective study skills:*** Learner passivity should be avoided and lecturer-learner interaction should support the learner in obtaining effective study skills. Learning activities should be designed to stimulate active involvement of the learner. Thus, learning by memorizing facts should be enhanced and extended by understanding and application of fundamentals.
- ***Learning styles:*** Differentiating or adapting teaching to the needs of learners will improve learners' academic achievement. Entwistle defined a learning style as the general tendency of a learner to adopt a particular learning strategy to enhance learning. In straightforward terms, learning styles are simply different approaches to learning by different individuals, to learn the same thing (Entwistle, 1985).

5. APPLICATION

Practical examples: To assist you in starting to facilitate learning effectively in your classes, let us share some thoughts on aspects considered important and that have worked especially well to stimulate learners to participate in their own learning process in the fields of Radiography and Biochemistry:

- First of all, **formulating and asking questions** is one of the principal skills of the lecturer, as facilitator, who aims to promote discussion in which people actively and freely participate and in which they think creatively about a task or topic. Remember to keep in mind that all questions need to take into account the two important indicators for effective learning the planned performance indicator and the learning outcome.

- Each person in your class needs to feel like an important member in the group. By striving to **maintain the self-esteem of each learner**, you acknowledge the unique abilities of each learner. Enhancing self-esteem means acknowledging good ideas, expressing confidence in the learner's abilities and praising them for satisfactory or improved performance. Remember, nothing breeds success like success. By praising the learners, they learn from their successes and they will feel good about their participation in your class.
- **Listen and respond with sympathy.** This is a facilitation skill that lets learners know that you have heard and accurately understand their concerns and feelings. If, for instance, a learner is having difficulty accepting an idea or doesn't feel comfortable about participating in an activity, learning will not occur until that learner knows you have heard the concern and will address it.
- **Check for understanding.** The main objective of learning is to communicate information to change behaviour. Checking for understanding ensures effective communication. It is important that everyone has the same understanding of exactly what is being discussed. To help you check for understanding, you can use phrases like: "Did I hear you say....", "Do we agree (disagree) that...", "Did I hear that right?", "Let me check my understanding of what you're saying." These kinds of phrases allow learners to confirm or clarify the accurate understanding of messages.
- **Make procedural suggestions.** Part of your job as facilitator is to control the group process so that the learning objectives are achieved. There will be times when the group strays off track, forgets the sequence of instructions, or otherwise needs to refocus on the task at hand. These occasions are best handled through a "procedural suggestion", such as: "May I suggest that...?", "Do you think it would be a good idea to...?", "Can we talk about...?", "Are you ready to...?"

In an OBET approach learners are required to take responsibility for their own learning. They have to develop a deep and personal understanding of their learning, from which they will be able to continuously learn and adapt their knowledge as their life circumstances change. The facilitator is challenged to indeed facilitate the learning process to ultimately support learners to reach this goal (Manual for Learning and Teaching: 2004). To succeed, you should be well organised, positive and enthusiastic, empathetic, have high expectations, have a trustful and respectful relationship with learners and have good facilitation skills listening, questioning and responding.

6. REFLECTION

The saying goes: "Show me and I will remember; involve me and I will understand; have me develop my own learning and I will gain Wisdom!" (Blamey, 2004). A good facilitator can show and involve his learners, but to attain excellence he/she needs to enable himself to lead his/her learners to attain wisdom. And, as the basic aim is a movement of information from the facilitator and other resources to the learner, an excellent teacher must not forget that he/she has the privilege of moulding the clay given to him, not beating it into submission. An excellent teacher is the one who, in years to come, will be remembered, not for his/her lecturing so much, but also for his/her facilitation for being alive, making the subject alive.

There will be a human side to this facilitator he/she will be able to actively listen to learners' problems; inspire confidence and he/she won't be feared. He/she will use good humour to put

learners at ease; will be coherent and organised; be an excellent mapmaker that can illustrate to learners the whole terrain of study, thereby pointing them in the right direction to explore learning material themselves. He/she will be the one to help learners distinguish the trees from the wood, always bringing them back to the "big picture" and he/she will also be able to relate his/her specialization to the big picture.

The root of his/her skill will lie in a wide experience of his/her subject, but he/she will also know that he/she lives in the 'Blue Peter' generation the generation of disco, clubs, colour, shape, style. The generation of web-search, media-driven, one-liner, txt msg (text message), the generation that needs a totally different approach if you are serious in meeting your customers' needs. Linked to this awareness, expert presentation skills and proficiency in technical lecturing skills such as clarity of speech and meaning and pacing of speech to suit the amount of info relayed, must form a winning combination.

An excellent facilitator will encourage learners to share what they already know about their field of learning, while learning only what they lack. He/she will step back from dominating the learning process so that the entire brain power of his/her class or group becomes available to unlock the vast world of science. It requires that he/she extricates himself from the compulsion to pose as an expert, who mastered any given body of content and, instead, join his/her learners honestly as a continuing co-learner. He/she will understand the principle that as a facilitator of learning, his/her role is more that of steering than stopping or pushing. The statement that no-one has really achieved until everyone has achieved should be high on his/her agenda. His/her endeavour should be to release the potential of his/her learners to really investigate their subject; to use their existing knowledge to the full; to discuss and argue; to expand their thinking and understanding. He/she will allow his/her learners to make mistakes albeit in a culture of no-blame. His/her philosophy should be to lead his/her learners to stand on the shoulders of giants to view the future and to be like children on the sea-shore of knowledge, picking up the pebbles of their learning material and replacing and re-arranging them after every wave and tide.

Radiating excitement, enthusiasm and involvement, an excellent facilitator will emphasize learner ownership and learner participation. He/she will radically review the manner of learning, especially in his/her subject, and will incorporate not only timeous and relevant feed-back, but also "feed-forward" that will help make the learning experience one of deep learning, shying away from surface learning. The principle of holding onto the hearts and minds of learners will manifest in letting go of any woeful inhibitions he/she might have; breaking down distance between leader and led; teacher and taught. In all, he/she will be practicing management of minds, maintaining attention, motivation and momentum that should result in facilitator fulfilment as well as learner fulfilment in achieving.

7. CONCLUSION

An ideal facilitator will radiate confidence learners cannot have assurance in a facilitator lacking therein. And, he/she will have the boldness to throw out any unwanted and unproductive long-held views; trying to alter and persuade colleagues and learners to renew their way of thinking and of the need for necessary changes in work patterns and style, always being aware himself that 'of all baggage mankind is the most difficult to transport'. An excellent facilitator will not only make effort, but will make waves in facilitating his/her subject.

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