

Changing university culture to enhance student engagement through student learning partnerships

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Introduction and background

Students enter universities with hopes and aspirations, including the expectation of developing enhanced skills to improve their employability. With increased numbers of first-generation students entering universities, traditional teaching limited to subject knowledge is insufficient to develop student skills. Graduates devoid of skills first swell unemployed numbers. Continuation of such reactionary pedagogy can then lead despairing youth to take matters into their own hands, which in reality is the backdrop to this case study, where a student-led national insurrection led to thousands of student deaths (Ekaratne and Weerakoon, 2013). This insurrection led universities to change teaching approaches and methods used to train graduating students. The intervention (discussed in this case study) at a university in a developing nation arose directly from this experience. In order to change teaching in universities of this country, Sri Lanka, it was mandated that a postgraduate certificate in teaching in higher education be followed by all new lecturers. This mandatory course was the Certificate in Teaching in Higher Education (CTHE). Although this CTHE course retained traditional course *content*, what this paper describes is how the CTHE developed and sustained a learning-teaching *partnership* by changing the culture of learning-teaching, which, in turn, improved graduating students' skills and learning.

Discussion of pedagogy / practice

At the inception of the CTHE, new teaching methodologies were discussed. Even so, common complaints by the lecturers persisted: 'students were not interested'; getting students engaged in learning was 'difficult'. This reflected a student-blame culture, with a passive student nature, and a dismembered learning-teaching partnership. Teaching models showed that such a student-blame culture was associated with teachers with a limited repertoire of teaching methodologies, characterised as being at the lowermost developmental level as teachers (Level 1 of Biggs and Tang, 2007). In order to move teachers to the higher levels of proficiency and confidence that were needed to forge a learning-teaching partnership and lead students to engage, the CTHE course enabled lecturers from several Sri Lankan universities to focus on how the students behaved and what they did in their classes – and, where possible, even outside them – thereby shifting teachers away from a student-blame culture. Lecturers were asked to draw up plans for engaging students in frequent student-lecturer contact, both in and out of classes, encouraging collaborative and social student interactions, giving timely feedback on performance to benefit students, communicating higher expectations and respecting students' diverse talents (Chickering and Gamson, 1987). These incorporated the use of active learning techniques, as one of the seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education. Gradually, as lecturers began to view their undergraduates as adults and individuals (Knowles, 1980), more students began to engage in learning activities and lecturers were on their way to evolving a learning-teaching partnership with students. However, further changes were needed as the improved learning-teaching methods were being implemented, as described next.

Implementation and evaluation

The CTHE course, as stated above, aimed at changing the teaching culture and also at helping students to change their learning culture by engaging both lecturers and students jointly in learning-teaching partnerships. These changes were more readily achieved when lecturers 'discovered new ways' and thus moved away from blindly imitating the teaching methods of their own teachers. These 'new ways' were introduced to get lecturers used to the concept of 'learning partnerships', an approach initially achieved by encouraging the lecturers to interact creatively and constructively amongst themselves. For example, when lecturers proposed a method new to their teaching, they were asked to get feedback on it from their peers.

However, a drawback still remained: undermining the confidence of the lecturers to move on to a learning-teaching partnership with their students was the feeling that students were not cooperating with them or engaging well when they implemented their new self-designed methods. They felt that their students were resisting efforts to engender partnership in learning-teaching, as passive student behaviours were still evident:

A lecturer talking about the experience of implementing a newly-designed quiz said: *"I told students in advance about the quiz. But only very few came to class prepared for the quiz"*.

A lecturer talking about a new reading assignment said: *"I felt disheartened...the majority of the students had not done the reading... So, I had to do a lecture instead of the planned discussion on the selected terrestrial habitats, based on the reading [students were supposed to read the material, but had not read it]."*

Similarly, other lecturers said: *"The students are very lazy..."*, *"They don't answer. Don't even look at me, when I ask a question in the class, except for the usual 3 [in a class of 152 students following law]"*.

Analysis showed that these new teaching strategies had failed to engage students and lecturers believed that students remained uninterested.

The course tutors, having interviewed those lecturers who had voiced such concerns, identified one possible reason for the problems: the students lacked interest because they did not understand what they were actually expected to do – their lecturers had failed to give clear and specific guidance about how to approach a task. A management undergraduate, where the lecturer had provided learning outcomes, had this to say:

"we don't know why we are given learning outcomes at the beginning of each chapter of the course handbooks and lectures. We never paid attention to learning outcomes. Don't know what to do with those."

Consequently, as one measure to overcome this barrier to potential partnership, lecturers were asked to formulate a prepared script to be delivered verbatim to their students, with precise guidance as to what must be done and a clear definition of expectations – this script had to be first submitted to peer scrutiny and feedback on it obtained, so as to eliminate potential student misunderstanding and to guarantee the clarity of the instructions to be given.

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Though this measure was implemented, improvement in student response to new teaching approaches was very limited. Lecturers, perhaps understandably, continued to voice their concerns:

“Students come to class expecting to copy answers from me, rather than doing it themselves first”;

“The students in my Chemistry class are not interested to engage in learning, they see doing it on their own as an additional work”;

“Students complain that they need to put in lot of time to do their homework etc. For some of them it is a waste of time to do homework”;

“Students don’t take up the responsibility of learning. They want lecturers to tell them everything, don’t like to go to library”.

Thus, lecturer trust was still not robust enough to get the staff-student partnership going.

Since the prepared-script approach was trialled in different subject disciplines and by different lecturers, mere clarification of instructions seemed not to be the answer to perceived student resistance to a potential learning partnership. Further discussion with those lecturers who were at pains to implement new methods, including the scripts, seemed to confirm a lack of interest on the part of students to engage in active learning, even though the benefits of this were obvious to the lecturers. Their sincere commitment to the design of new methodology was alone not enough to challenge lack of motivation amongst their students: “Student motivation has.... been described as one of the foremost problems in education...[and] most cited by teachers” (Ames, 1990 p.410). A core feature of a successful student-lecturer partnership is the student-engagement model, though this may vary, in accordance with different contexts and stakeholders, in its links to motivation (Land and Gordon, 2013, p.21).

The script accordingly underwent further improvement to support the implementation of the lecturers' new teaching methods, by means of the addition of a 'motivational component' (MC); this consisted of a much more explicit definition of the potential benefits – such as skills' acquisition – of new learning activities, so that the students would more readily embrace what their lecturers themselves valued in working in partnership. Thus, the script now had two components: the MC, spelling out the benefits of positive engagement with the new learning-teaching activity and the Instructional Component (IC), the practice that students should undertake in order to gain the defined benefit/s to them.

Implementation of this two-component script, in tandem with new teaching methods, produced both student and lecturer feedback confirming changed student behaviour and significantly-increased student interest in engaging with new learning approaches. The following examples represent the range of comment from students in different faculties:

“It was in your module we heard about constructive alignment and saw the importance of quizzes you give us... Those quizzes no longer burden us”.

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"You not only created a friendly environment in class, but also encouraged us to raise questions throughout the environment module... Please continue this practice with future students also".

"What you told us gave a meaning to the library tour we were given [as part of their orientation programme]. I am determined to use the library throughout my university time".

"We are always told what punishments we could get if we did not meet deadlines. It was refreshing to hear what we can gain by meeting deadlines".

"Essays can develop so much of skills. I wish I had known these benefits of essay writing. My teachers in school didn't see the need to tell us why we were asked to write essays. I thought it was to check our knowledge in grammar and spelling".

"I thought we were given assignments [as assessments] because tests are an essential part in the university. I didn't know students actually learn applications of management principles etc by doing assignments".

A former US Secretary of Education stated that "[t]here are three things to remember about education. The first one is motivation. The second one is motivation. The third one is motivation." (Terrell H. Bell in Ames, 1990, p.409).

After the introduction of the MC to the scripts, the lecturers likewise witnessed changes in student behaviour and learning. They said:

"Students interact with me. They have questions and they ask questions even outside the classroom...I knew only a couple of international law students, but I now know almost all of them and many by their names too".

"We have very much less issues with students free-riding".

"I teach motivation theories as part of my subject, but didn't think I need to motivate students to learn...I don't have to be the police now. They put in effort and time to learn".

"It's fun. We [teachers and students] are now in this [learning] together, no longer us against them".

A clear improvement was now consistently evident in feedback received about the effectiveness of lecturers' new teaching methods, with confirmation that almost all students were now engaging with them. Lecturers also reported that student assignment marks had improved as a result of successful implementation of the new practices. What was most important was that lecturers and students began to trust each other (the fundamental element of a learning-teaching partnership), as shown by a lecturer saying:

"I do not even need a script now. What my third year law students want to know is whether the learning activity I want them to do is for another new teaching method. They know that new teaching methods benefit them".

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“After you got us formed into groups to do math homework, we are now forming homework groups for other subjects also and on our own.”

This change in the learning-teaching partnership culture was further illustrated when students in classes conducted by other, more seasoned, lecturers requested that they too be given such learning opportunities in the courses they were following. For example, philosophy students asked their dean to make all the lecturers in their faculty adopt teaching-learning strategies that would generate learning benefits for their classes, instead of only delivering lectures.

Some of the lecturers stated that when they told their students that they were following a teaching methodology course to improve student learning, their students were both surprised and pleased. Students were genuinely surprised to hear that their lecturers cared so much about them and their learning that they would follow a training course. Other lecturers said that they first heard about the CTHE course from their students, who wanted to know whether their lecturers would also follow the course.

The lecturers were unanimous that the CTHE course had been what brought fully home to them that the purpose of teaching is to generate a learning partnership with students, something they had not realised before.

Lessons learnt

The most significant lesson learnt was that continuous, outcomes-based monitoring and evaluation have to be conducted to ensure that targeted outcomes are achieved in the changing climate in higher education. When such a development pathway is followed, it is possible to change an existing culture and to develop partnerships that raise students and teachers to what we may describe as optimum levels of engaged effectiveness. Whilst adoption of new methods is necessary in the changing climate, equally essential to their successful implementation are: resolute determination to overcome any challenges that arise; sufficient time for the careful monitoring of, and associated modifications to, those initiatives.

Related to, and arising from, this learning, a next step may well be to demonstrate to students – and thereby to motivate them – what learning opportunities and benefits they can leverage by adopting a motivational approach in their own dealings with university systems. For example, many developing-country university management structures already have student representatives, though their voices remain stilled, owing to their fear of antagonising their teachers or the establishment. Therefore, rather than remaining negatively critical about university matters that affect their development as undergraduates, students would benefit much more if they could be trained (as lecturers were, in this case study) to re-focus their own actions towards motivating their universities to plan and act in the best interests of students by improving the learning experience. Students and student bodies could then leverage a much-improved teaching and learning journey for all stakeholders, in place of the protests that student bodies now engage in, which only serve to alienate university management.

In contrast, student bodies in some western countries seem to have passed this bottleneck, to focus not on protests against the establishment but on productive learning enhancement

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actions that management can hardly ignore or condemn. For example, in 2008, the UK's National Union of Students (NUS, 2009) launched a campaign to increase feedback to students, having surveyed students to "show that only a quarter were given verbal feedback, despite three quarters stating this as their preferred method of receiving the information". The NUS went on to raise awareness that feedback to students was below acceptable levels, thus forcing universities to formulate processes to give students better feedback.

A similarly productive re-focusing of the voice of student bodies in developing countries could be possible were student bodies with such experiences in the west to develop partnerships across developed/developing contexts, so as to facilitate a better tomorrow for less fortunate young people across the seas.

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