

## TEACHING-LEARNING FROM STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES: IMPLICATIONS FOR ACTIVE LEARNING STRATEGIES #

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*The purpose of the study was to analyse students' perceptions regarding the concepts of teaching and learning using the qualitative method. Subjects were 162 first year university students. The findings indicated that there were two categories of teaching, namely 'directism' and 'openness'. The majority of students preferred directism or structured teaching. Only a small percentage of students were found in the openness category, where teaching was regarded as part of their responsibility. There were five categories of learning: quantitative increase in knowledge, memorisation, application of knowledge, abstraction of meaning, and changing a person. The implication of the findings is so that those who approached teaching as directism would probably learn in a superficial way compared to those in the openness category. Teachers have to change their way of teaching if they want to change the quality of learning among the students.*

Research on student conception of teaching from the second order perspective was being carried out since a decade ago. In a study conducted by Van Rossum and Taylor (1987) it was found there were four categories of teaching namely directism, limited directism, openness, and organized openness. In directism, the teacher structures and interprets the subject matter for the students. The student is in every way dependent on the teacher. In limited directism, the process of teaching and learning is still structured by the teacher, but the students claim that they have a say in the process though in a limited way. In openness self determination of the student is most important. This include self activity, self determined structuring, and initiative by the student. In organized openness, the directive teaching conception plays a secondary part. Van Rossum and Taylor (1987) found that 68% of the

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subjects chose directism as a category of teaching and only 32% preferred openness.

Research on learning from students' perspectives indicated that learning was understood in at least two ways, that is, as an 'active' process and as a 'passive' process (Saljo, 1979, 1982; Van Rossum & Schenk, 1984; Wan Zah, 1993). Active learning involves the internalization and the construction of knowledge, whereas passive learning involves the transfer of knowledge from the source to the recipients' mind.

How students understand learning was found to be related to their approach to learning (Wan Zah, 1993). Students who perceived learning as a passive process focused their attention just on finding facts, whereas students who perceived learning as an active process were found to be looking for the essence or the whole idea of the lesson. As a result we have different qualities of learning. The conception of learning was claimed to be the result of teaching experiences that learners received during the process of learning (Kember & Gow, 1991; Rohana, 1988).

The difference in quality of learning as a result of the different conceptions is obvious. The difference lies in the students' focus either to extract the meaning directly or indirectly in the learning material. If they have negative conceptions of learning, their attention towards understanding will diminish (Saljo, 1982). A study on students in higher education indicated that 80% of the subjects studied have passive conceptions of learning (Wan Zah, 1993).

Due to the relationship that exists between teaching and learning as suggested by past studies, this study examines the two processes from students' perspectives. The conceptions of teaching from students' point of view is important because then we know what type of teaching students prefer and whether the evaluation system is appropriate. For example, students may prefer the traditional type of teaching in which teachers prepare everything for them. Similarly, the conception of learning will tell us what learning is as perceived by the students and this can be used as a basis to understand the problems in learning and hence to improve learning as a whole. Students who perceive learning as a passive process seem ready to become faithful recipients and expect teachers to become effective givers who can present all the information needed. On the other hand, students who perceive learning as an active process may need some freedom in interpreting and exploring knowledge.

The focus of the study was to examine the qualitative differences of students' conceptions on teaching and learning. The students' conceptions are regarded as reflecting their experiences in teaching and learning. It is expected that the results will give an overview on teaching and learning in the Faculty of Educational Studies, University of Agriculture, Malaysia. This is important for steps can be taken for the future teachers in the above Faculty.

## METHOD

### Sample

The subjects were 162 first year students in four academic programs in the Faculty of Educational Studies, University of Agriculture, Malaysia. They were 86 males and 76 females.

### Procedure

Subjects were requested to respond in writing to a number of questions related to their conceptions on teaching and learning. The questionnaire were administered at the beginning of the semester. The objectives of the study were explained to the subjects before they answered the questions.

The students' answers were regarded as the research data. Data were analysed by an inductive approach known as phenomenography. Phenomenography is a research method for mapping the qualitatively different ways in which people experience, conceptualise, perceive, and understand various aspects of phenomena in the world around them (Marton, 1986; Marton, Dall'Alba, & Beaty, 1993).

Data analysis will produce descriptive categories on how teaching and learning are viewed by the subjects. This means that the analysis is not tied to any predetermined classification scheme.

## RESULTS

### Teaching Conceptions

Table 1

#### *Students' conceptions of teaching*

Teaching Categories	Percentages
Directism	72
Openness	28
Total	100

As shown in Table 1, students' conceptions of teaching can be divided into two categories, namely 'directism' and 'openness'. The majority of subjects (72%) perceived teaching with characteristic of directism while only 28% of subjects were in the openness category.

### **Directism**

A general element of teaching agreed by students in this category is that they expect teaching to bring about positive changes in themselves. This included changes in behaviour as well as knowledge. If teaching does not result in understanding then it is not considered as good teaching. The elements of good teaching as perceived by the students are directed towards changes especially in the understanding of the knowledge presented in class.

Our findings indicate that the students look at the teacher as the only source of knowledge as they expect the teacher to prepare the course content. The teacher is regarded as playing a very active role in teaching as he decides on the planning and preparation of teaching materials.

Generally the students perceive teaching as the responsibility of the teacher while they themselves act as passive recipients of knowledge. They do not perceive themselves as responsible in the implementation of the teaching process.

The following statements by subjects illustrate the elements of directism:

1. Good teaching means the teacher can present the knowledge to the students effectively. He can achieve the objectives of the lesson and the students understand what has been taught.
2. The teacher knows the subject very well.
3. Good teaching involves careful planning by the teacher in terms of objectives, teaching techniques, creative and innovative activities.
4. There are elements of encouragement and getting the students' attention during teaching.
5. After each lesson, students should be given handouts on reference material and the summary of the lesson.

### **Openness**

The involvement of students in teaching and learning indicate that the students are not passive learners. They prefer teaching methods which are student centred, such as, discussion or dialogues.

The discussion method allows a two-way communication between the teacher and the students. Teaching is regarded as the responsibility of both the teacher and the students. The following statements illustrate the above conception:

1. The students should be involved actively in class by questioning, discussing, and giving opinion.
2. The teacher should use communicative or discussion methods which can generate students' thinking.
3. Good teaching happens when there is a two-way communication, that is the teacher disseminate information and the students give their ideas and comments openly.

### The Conceptions of Learning

From the findings, the students' conceptions of learning were found to be synonymous with their goals and aims in learning. Their goals are as follows:

1. to gain knowledge.
2. to gain and disseminate knowledge.
3. to apply the acquired knowledge.
4. to understand knowledge.
5. to be able to change for the better.

As shown in Table 2, there are five categories of learning conceptions.

Table 2

#### *Students' conceptions of learning*

Learning Conceptions	Frequency	Percentages
1. To gain knowledge	88	54.3
2. To gain and disseminate knowledge	9	5.6
3. Application of acquired knowledge	40	24.6
4. Understanding of learned materials	15	9.1
5. Change in the individual	10	6.4
Total	162	100

The majority of students (54.3%) emphasized learning as to gain or increase knowledge. The main characteristics of this category is, learning can be formal or informal and takes place in various situations.

In the second category, learning is conceptualized as to gain and disseminate knowledge. Only a small percentage (5.6%) of subjects belong to this category. The main characteristics include the mastery of knowledge and the ability to impart that knowledge. There is an element of interaction where learning is seen not only for the self but also for others.

The two categories of learning as mentioned above indicate that the students perceive learning as a passive process. Learning was regarded as an activity to increase and transfer knowledge, and to acquire information.

However, the remaining three categories of learning showed that students perceived learning as an active process. A considerable number of subjects (25%) understood learning as the application of acquired knowledge. The characteristics of this category include the acquisition of knowledge, comprehension and the ability to apply this knowledge in life. Another 15.5% of the students conceptualised learning as involving comprehension and evaluation, critical thinking and openness to new information. Learning was taken to mean as understanding the context and the individual should be able to interpret reality or to gain insight so that what is learned can be applied in everyday life.

## **Relationship between Teaching and Learning**

Further examination of the categories of teaching and learning shows certain similarities. Although this study did not analyse the data quantitatively, from the open-ended answers it was found that subjects who perceived teaching with characteristics of directism appeared to have understood learning as a passive process. On the other hand, subjects who perceived teaching with characteristics of openness, seemed to have understood learning as an active process.

The following are some examples of subjects' answers relating to the above findings.

## **Subjects' Conceptions of Learning**

### **Category 1**

S23A Learning means change in behaviour. It is a process whereby knowledge is channelled from the teacher to the pupil.

**Category 2**

S69B Learning is a continuous process and understanding the knowledge acquired.

**Category 3**

S16A Learning is the acquisition of unlimited knowledge. That knowledge can be applied in life.

**Category 4**

S155 Learning means to understand and to respond towards something. It is an activity by which understanding and critical thinking are acquired. Learning means to be able to give ideas and have liberal views about knowledge.

**Category 5**

S43A Learning is the ability to think liberally and creatively. Learning means the drive to achieve life's goals and to improve one's education.

**Subjects' Conceptions of Teaching**

**Directism**

S23A Good teaching happens when there is a positive change in the student, in terms of behaviour, knowledge, and norms.

S69B Good teaching means the teacher can present the knowledge to the students effectively. He can achieve the objectives of the lesson and the students understand what has been taught.

**Openness**

S16A Good teaching brings about beneficial learning for the universe.

S155 Good teaching happens when there is a two-way communication, that is the teacher disseminate information and the students give their ideas and comments openly.

S43A Good teaching has elements of truth and logic. Students should not accept something which is not realistic.

**DISCUSSION**

The findings supported Marton's (1986) contention that there is a relationship between students' conceptions on teaching and learning. If they understand teaching as a creative process, they accept responsibility as active learners.

The students' perception and conceptions on teaching and learning could be related to or influenced by their experiences as teachers in schools. A large number of subjects (58%) had teaching experience between one and twenty years before joining the university. However, subjects who did not have any teaching experience could have perceived teaching and learning from their experiences as students in schools. Their experiences in the classrooms and how the teachers taught them have given them ideas on the teaching and learning process.

The perception of students on teaching and learning tend to move in a vicious circle. Passive teaching will continuously produce passive learning. Teachers as well as students will be in the same circle as long as there are no efforts to break that circle. To produce quality teaching and learning, certain changes need to be done immediately. Teachers have to be aware of this phenomenon and take steps to change the teaching process so that students are involved more actively. Students have to be aware of the importance of forming the correct perception on teaching and learning and be more responsible in becoming proactive and innovative in meeting the future challenges. As students in the Malaysian higher education, they have to be concerned with the goals that they have achieved in contributing to the economic development of the country as well as the realisation of the nation's vision that by year 2020, everyone from all walks of the life would be highly educated, innovative, and creative in the building of a highly progressive society.

## **Suggestions**

The perception of teaching and learning will gradually change when teachers and students are aware of their responsibilities in developing active learning strategies. Some examples of active learning strategies are as follows:

### **Collaborative Planning**

Students can play a part in decision making. One way students can become active participants within the academic community is to allow them to voice their opinion in curricular decision making. The teacher can negotiate with students about the contents to be taught. In addition, they can try to balance the dynamics of control and responsibility for learning (Anderson, 1994).



Both students and teachers can decide how much time to be allocated for reflective thinking, discussion, and for group as well as individual learning.

### **Reflective Thinking and Focusing**

As a methodology, it helps prospective teachers develop a reflective process based on:

- making observations and comparing what they see over time;
- taking their own attitudes into account; and
- exploring the conflicts and considerations that may arise as they are learning to teach.

Strategic reflection is a combination of observation and critical contemplation on one's own attitudes, conflicts, and concerns. It helps prospective teachers become more conscious of their decisions to incorporate, to alter or to abandon certain teaching techniques. Strategic reflection plays an important role in teacher preparation as it encouraged internal dialogues in preservice teachers as learners and as teachers that promote heightened awareness and understanding of that practices and why they adapt, adopt, or reject certain teaching techniques as part of their repertoire (Flower, 1994).

### **Discussion and Dialogues**

For students to truly understand effective teaching, they must actively observe others teach, engage in dialogues about teaching and reflect on their own teaching and that of others.

Students must work together in a counselling group in order to lead active seminars, assist each other in practising teaching skills, support one another during the emotional stress of a demanding programme and provide constructive information to each other what they can see in schools and what they admire and dislike in actual educational experience.

Dialogues should be encouraged and debate should be frequent. This will enable students to learn as much from each other as they do from teachers. Students should observe lessons, discuss what they think is appropriate, offer alternative instructional strategies, and suggest where the lesson could have been enhanced. The teacher should provide

input that can promote appropriate instructional practices and illustrates where theory has met practice.

### **Cooperative Learning**

Cooperative learning has positive effects on student achievement particularly when the methods used emphasize group goals and student accountability. Cooperative learning also has the positive effects on a number of outcomes other than achievement, such as student self-esteem, peer support for achievement, internal locus of control, and cooperativeness. The use of cooperative learning approach in the preparation and supervision of preservice teachers would provide a modelling of instruction that could encourage student teachers to appreciate the value of learning with peers, increasing the possibility that they would also be more open to learning together with future colleagues.

### **Peer-Coaching**

Preservice peer coaching is collegial relationship between student teachers who provide reciprocal, in-class assistance to one another as they attempt to incorporate new teaching skills, strategies, and approaches into their teaching. The typical peer-coaching cycle includes a preview conference, during which the student teachers discuss the focus of the upcoming lesson; observation of the lesson by the student teacher; a follow up conference, during which the student teacher analyzes the lesson. Peer-coaching facilitates the recall of skills and strategies from methodology classes, fosters collegiality and promotes reflection on teaching. Effective use of peer-coaching requires training in interacting both as a coach and a recipient of coaching. Supervising teachers also need to be introduced to the goals, procedures, and benefits of peer-coaching. Problems inherent in preservice peer-coaching include increased time requirements involvement of university personnel, development of unhealthy competitiveness and student teachers' lack of confidence in giving constructive feedback (Neubert & Stover, 1994).

The objective of peer-coaching is for students to help each other to improve their instructional abilities. It will enable student teachers to develop their own criteria for evaluation of and responsibility for quality classroom performance. Effects of coaching on the transfer of training include more frequent practice of new strategies; more appropriate use of new strategies; long term retention of knowledge of

coached strategies and clearer understanding of the new strategies. Participants have reported that peer-coaching made a valuable contribution to their field of experience (Anderson, 1994).

## CONCLUSION

In order for students to change their perceptions on teaching and learning, teachers need to change their approach to teaching. The teaching and learning activities need to involve students actively as suggested by the above approaches. The active participation of students in curriculum planning as well as in varied approaches of teaching and learning will produce responsible learners who will have new perceptions on teaching and learning. In addition, teachers have to be aware of the suitability of the evaluation system employed so that the ultimate goals of teacher education can be achieved.

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