Newsletter SLAIHEE

Volume 3, Number 1
Edited by Suki Ekaratne

Material from this Newsletter may be used with due acknowledgement.
Opinions expressed are personal to the author/s.

This volume of the SLAIHEE Newsletter contains the abstracts that were presented at the 3rd **SDC / SLAIHEE Conference,** which was held at the University of Colombo on Friday 27 April 2007, 9.30am to 4.00pm. The theme of the conference was *"Developing Skills in University Lecturers and Students"*. The keynote address on this theme was delivered by Mr Deepal Sooriyarachchi, CEO of Eagle Insurance.

(For more details on this conference, please see www.slaihee.org)

This conference was followed by a workshop on 'Reflective Practice', held on 28th April 2007, at the Staff Development Centre, University of Colombo.

SLAIHEE
– an organization of individuals committed to changing Higher Education in Sri Lanka

SLAIHEE is a 3-year old organization of volunteers who want to change the nature of higher education in Sri Lanka. Its activities are designed to support educational development so that we produce lectures and graduates having self-confidence, self-esteem and the skills required to meet present-day needs. For this purpose, SLAIHEE organizes an annual conference (with refereed oral presentations/posters) as well as other events and activities, centred on issues related to teaching and learning. The themes, and keynote speakers, of the three conferences held so far were;

THEME	KEYNOTE SPEAKER
First Conference	
"Teaching to Put Students First"	Dr Liz Beaty Director-Learning, HEFCE,UK
Second Conference	
"From Teaching to a Learning Culture - Providing Structures for the Paradigm Shift"	Mr Stephen Cox CFTC Consultant on Staff Dev.
Third Conference	
"Developing Skills in University Lecturers and Students"	Mr Deepal Sooriyarachchi CEO of Eagle Insurance

(For more details on these conferences and aims, please see www.slaihee.org)

SLAIHEE *membership* is open to permanent academic staff / faculty of degree-awarding institutions in Sri Lanka. Please visit www.slaihee.org for details of membership and a downloadable version of the SLAIHEE application form.

Changing Teaching Methods to address the Mismatch in Perceptions on Higher Level Thinking between University Students and Employers

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A survey conducted among the students of the Wayamba University of Sri Lanka, and employers, revealed that;

a) 100% students believed that employers expect higher thinking skills from graduate-employees, and 78.6% of students believed that employers expected higher level of thinking.

b) 71.4% students believed that they lacked higher thinking skills when they entered the university, and that the ability was progressively developed during their university studies.

c) only 15% of employers believed graduate-employees possessed such skills and qualities, though they expect independent, responsible and creative employees with analytical skills.

To address the above mismatch, students need to be inculcated in the higher level of thinking (application, analysis and evaluation) contained in Bloom's Taxonomy. However, secondary schooling encourages students to be 'followers', rather than being critical/analytical/innovative thinkers. Students also believe that they are expected to write notes, memorize and reproduce the same note at the assessment. The problem becomes more serious when the very same students become lecturers and continue to teach the adoption of a similar approach. This method has to be changed as the demand in this globalizing world is for people who can analyze problems and find solutions.

We present methods that we have used in our university teaching where we exposed students to deal with different situations/ problems, which in turn could lead to a paradigm shift in acquisition of skills in demand. Initially it is difficult to shift from a form-bound mentality to an open mentality, but continuous use of teaching methods facilitating analytical thinking could make the students to see the situations from different angles.

Lessons Learnt – using Small Group Discussions as a Strategy for Active Learning

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In the first year course in law, University of Colombo, Legal Method is taught only in English, while the other four subjects are offered in English, Sinhala and Tamil. Small Group Discussions (SGD) have been used in large classes to ensure that each student is engaged in active learning. This study presents how the first year Sinhala medium law students, who had to follow Legal Method in English medium, were made to engage in active learning through SGD.

The SGD mode ensured active learning of most students even though it was a large class consisting of 171 students. While, previously, students were given a topic for analyses and their learning/feedback was reported in the plenary session, SGD ensured that students who were not confident to share their views with the entire class could do so with 'snowballing', through their smaller discussion groups.

While the lecture was conducted in English, group discussion was in Sinhala, with SGD time being used by groups to engage in "peer learning". This enabled students to surmount the 'the language barrier' challenge, with students who found difficulty in following the lecture in English, being able to clarify their doubts from peers/colleagues. Thus, a new insight into SGD emerged, where it could also be used in overcoming language barriers.

Feedback data collected from a random sample group of students (n=50) indicated the effectiveness of SGD, with 86% of students showing improved confidence and 88% having engaged in peer learning during the SGD sessions.

The presentation will raise questions as to whether group formulation should be informal or formal. If it is to be formal, on what basis should students be grouped? A comparison will be made of informal group discussions in the classroom as opposed to formal group work for purposes of continuous assessment. On the basis of this analysis, ideas for developing small group discussions as a strategy will be presented.

Supporting the Development of Employability Skills in Students through Guest Lectures

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University teaching in Sri Lanka is criticized for not producing graduates with industry skills meriting executive level recruitment, such as 'soft skills' (*e.g.* skills for communication, negotiation, team-work, interpersonal facilitation and organizing), technical skills and practical knowledge.

Intending to improve students' soft skills stated above, together with subject knowledge and practical applicability of theories learned in class, I introduced a guest lecture series in a course I facilitated, where students, in groups, organized the guest lectures that were delivered by specialized personnel in the relevant fields. For this learning activity, students were supported with my continuous guidance, where I also gave very specific written guidelines covering all aspects relating to organizing a guest lecture. Ten such guest lectures were conducted.

A student questionnaire was used to assess whether the expected results were achieved by the learning activity. From the 31 questionnaires having a 100% response rate, 97% of students agreed that organizing guest lectures helped them develop their interpersonal and organizing skills, 90% agreed that it helped them develop their communication skills, and 93% agreed that it helped them to relate theory learned in class with practical aspects and helped them enhance their subject knowledge. Informal discussions

with the guest lecturers and students confirmed the results of the questionnaire survey.

Further development of this Guest Lecture method for improving student skills can include making the approach to become more student-centred by withdrawing/modifying the very specific written guidelines given to students that comprehensively covered organizing a guest lecture, and using a more rigorous criterion-referenced assessment tool. Sustaining these skills in students will require other courses to constructively align, and design, learning activities where students are rewarded to use these skills to produce assessable outcomes.

Facilitating directional 'Movement of Thought' using Learning Agreements as Change Instruments in Teacher and Student Development

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The Certificate in Teaching in Higher Education (CTHE) course of the Staff Development Centre, University of Colombo attempts to bring about changes in teaching practices and skills to develop active learning in students. Participating teachers are challenged to reflectively *identify* past teaching practices needing change, to selectively *plan* changed improvement/s through reviewing available methods including underpinning theory, and to *undertake* implementation

using a script to motivate and instruct students appropriately. Teachers are supported to progressively overcome the resistance and discomfiture to learn, and adopt, this complex sequence of change by repeatedly framing these steps in the format of a Learning Agreement (LA) tool/instrument, and by enhancing probability of success through peer, tutor and mentor mediated improvements.

LAs (n=248) that were developed by 24 CTHE participants in 2005/2006 were analysed to identify the skills targeted for development by teachers in themselves, and in students. All LAs were focussed on reflective teacher-development practices, with 90% of them identifying changes with teaching-learning-assessment skills, 5% with personal effectiveness skills, and 0.8% with Inter-Personal skills. Improvements/changes to 'systems' were targeted in 4% of the LAs.

The study shows that university teachers can be successfully challenged, and facilitated, to undergo a directional 'movement of mind and thought' to change/shift from an instructional/delivery comfort zone to a teacher-student skill-development comfort zone at an early stage in their teaching careers, by using tools/instruments (such as a Learning Agreement) that would support them to reflect and perceive such change with a reduced perception of fear and threat.

The presentation will discuss how Learning Agreements continue to be used in the CTHE course to bring about the development of students' active-learning skills, through the development of teachers' reflective-teaching skills.

Addressing Possible Impacts on the Leaning Climate of Medical Students at University of Ruhuna based on Teacher Perceptions

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Teacher perceptions about university students are important as adult learning is considered to be different from the way children learn. The assumptions on adult learning in Knowles's formulations (Knowles, 1970) are that they are self-reliant, able to decide what they should study, and are competent in setting up their own study plans and objectives. Adults learn better in a relaxed, trusting, informal environment and are capable of assessing their own and peer's work. It is important for teachers in higher education to be aware of these factors for creating a suitable learning climate.

This study, with a response rate of 71% to a questionnaire survey (n=45; academics of Medical Faculty, University of Ruhuna), analysed the perceptions that teachers held with regard to identified aspects in their students, and its possible impact on the leaning climate in the university. 20% of teachers felt that students were untrustworthy. More than 50% felt that students should be given exact instructions all the time and monitored closely when accomplishing a given task. 60% of the respondents were either not sure or disagreed that students participated voluntarily in learning activities, and only 50% thought that students could take responsibility for their own learning. 65% were unsure or disagreed that students could assess the peers reliably. 80% were in favour of giving deadlines to accomplish a task.

The results indicate that over 50% of teachers apply assumptions applicable in teaching children to their teaching of university students, with a possible negative impact on student learning. This assumption may be due a lack of teacher awareness regarding adult learning, or of the true nature of their student population. The presentation will discuss possible ways for improving the student learning climate in the light of the above findings.

Life Skills Assessment as a Teaching Tool to improve Cognitive and Employability Skills in post-graduate students

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Lack of essential life skills in graduates is clearly a major issue related to graduate unemployment. The Ceylon Chamber of Commerce has identified several life skills lacking in our graduates. The aim of this study was to investigate the use of a range of formative assessment tasks to improve selected life skills (*viz*., Communication skill, Information skill and Decision making skill), and the improvement of cognitive skills, comparing their use in two consecutive batches of postgraduate students who followed the Design and Analysis of Experiment course in M.Sc in Applied Statistics at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura. It was the finding that

many postgraduates also do not possess these essential skills that prompted this study with a second batch of such students.

In the assessment tasks, 20% marks were allocated for assignments. The first part of assignment targeted information-retrieval and written communication skills, where students were required to submit a report on a topic selected randomly from the course content. In the second part of the assignment, the focus was on developing verbal communication skills, where students gave a 15-minute presentation on a tutor-assigned topic, followed by discussing the strengths and weaknesses of the presentation. The third part of the assignment targeted decision-making skills, with each student deciding on, and giving, written comments on 3 presentations.

The development of the intended life skills (following the above formative assignments) were tested at the mid-semester test (balance 80% of marks), where life skills were not tested directly but related cognitive skills were tested. Average mark (60.0, with SE 3.0) of this second batch of students was significantly higher (p=0.009) than that of their previous batch (49.4, with SE 2.6). Observed 21.5% increase in the average mark clearly showed the positive role of life skills on cognitive skills development. Problems faced and possible solutions will be discussed during the presentation.

Changing Criteria in Assessment to Reduce the Problem of Plagiarism and to Develop Skills

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To tackle plagiarism in essay or report-type take-home assignments, an improvement in the *method* of assessment is a better alternative than reverting to traditional closed book classroom tests. While even such tests can be formulated to encourage deep learning as opposed to rote-learning, essay or report type take-home assignments can develop research and academic-writing skills in a manner that trains a student for analytical writing. Thus, it is possible to reformulate existing assessment methods by changing criteria to reach intended student learning outcomes, such as to encourage and reward the *process* of academic research and writing, rather than only rewarding a final product that may not be the student's thoughtful and individual effort.

To test such a method, an assignment giving 8/15 marks for process and 7/15 marks for product was formulated. The process segment included guidelines to carry out a mind map, research timetable and diary of research with comments on the sources consulted. The product was a two-page essay *demonstrating a conclusion based on the research conducted*. Its effectiveness was assessed using a case study method, where 84.6% of students (n=13) recommended this assessment method, noting that following the guidelines reduced stress, encouraged creativity and developed analytical and organizational skills, including time management.

The resistance is from other teachers who are unfamiliar with the method and students who prefer less structured assignments. Thus further opportunities for sharing the experience with peers, demonstrating its efficacy and informing students are needed. Administrative acceptance of grading based in part on process skills as a requirement for at least two assignments per batch will continue to support the abovementioned positive results in the future.

Introduction of a Transparent Assessment Procedure to Develop Presentation Skills in Geography Students

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Numbers of Arts graduates are increasing annually, while their effectiveness in the job market is questioned. Developing their generic skills, such as presentation skills, will enable them to partly overcome these impressions.

Students should be made active learners by making the process of learning motivational and interesting to them (Biggs 1999). When assessment is transparent, students are motivated to achieve their best performance. If performance of the students related to their skills is being evaluated through a transparent assessment procedure, students are made aware of, and motivated to acquire, such skills.

Geography Special degree students participate in learning activities to develop their skills. They take a compulsory course unit which includes two presentations that are evaluated. However, until 2004 their presentation skills were not evaluated and the assessment procedure was not disclosed to them. In 2004, the marking scheme for assessing the presentations was reviewed and was introduced to the students prior to the assessment. The results showed a significant improvement in student performance at assessment, as well as of their presentation skills.

A feedback questionnaire on the presentations showed that 47% of students 'strongly agreed' and 38% 'agreed' that "*the awareness of the criteria for the assessment helped me to do this presentation in a more organized and more confident way*".

We also interviewed a sample of 15 students (23% out of 67) who graduated in 2005 and 2006 to evaluate how their acquired presentation skills had facilitated their present employment. Forty percent of the selected students had joined the private sector and 60% were employed in the public sector. The majority of the students (60% to 100%) agreed that they had developed specific skills such as confidence and time management through these presentations. 87% of students felt that practice in talking in front of an audience had facilitated facing job interviews.

Modifying Teaching and Assessment Methods to Improve Student Performance in Practicals

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An analysis of the semester-end practical examination answers from a second-year batch of 12 students where only 8 (66.6%) performed well, revealed that the main reasons for failure were that students did not 'understand' the theory behind the practical, how to complete the laboratory practical and were unaware how to do calculations and predictions based on the readings of the practical.

Therefore, teaching and assessment methods in the practical unit for this year were modified to include an individual practical demonstration session, interviewing every student after each practical and recording his/her performances, and posing a few simple questions (related to the method, equipment, theory and calculation procedure of the practical) while they were doing the practical. By this modification, six levels of learning described in Bloom's learning taxonomy were targeted for a second-year batch of 21 students. Results from the semester-end practical examination showed an improved performance with 17 (80.9%) out of 21 students successfully passing the practical examination, where 12 students performed very well and 5 passed the practical examination

This implies that the new teaching and assessment methods were able to correct the deficiencies identified in students of the earlier batch, stated above, with regard to the practical component of their study programme. These changed methods will need to be continued and improved, to maintain the improvements in future second-year students, while these students who showed the improved performance will need to be further exposed to similar teaching and assessment methods if they are to maintain their improved skills and performance.

Thank you for reading this volume of the SLAIHEE Newsletter, and for taking a first step to contribute to the 'thinking process' needed to change Higher Education in Sri Lanka.

If you want to take further steps in this worthy direction, then we invite you to become a member of SLAIHEE, or/and to contact us at info@slaihee.org