

SLAIHEE Newsletter

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USING TEACHING TO EXPAND RANGE OF SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IN STUDENTS AND STAFF

*Professor Lalitha Mendis**

Based on the invited Keynote Address on the theme “***Using Teaching to Expand Range of Skills Development in Students and Staff***” delivered at the Fourth SDC-SLAIHEE Joint Conference held on Monday 24th March 2008 at the University of Colombo

Universities educate future leaders and have therefore a responsibility to develop in undergraduates the high level of technical and other capacities that underpin economic growth. We need to develop skilled, socially responsible useful citizens who can and are willing to contribute to the development and upliftment of Sri Lanka and its people.

Core Generic skills

In a sense, the teaching and training of undergraduates for particular professions such as Medicine, Law, Engineering, Architecture, Business Management and Agriculture is easier because the skills we teach students are the ones they will use in their future professions. However in the case of courses in arts, social sciences and science, graduates have to learn to fit into a variety of occupations. What must be borne in mind however is

that whether or not the student and the teacher knows the jobs they are preparing for, certain core generic skills are required to survive in this modern competitive world striving for economic progress. Some of these generic skills were identified and compiled by CART (The Chamber Academic Round Table.).

- 1) Ability to communicate effectively – including in the English language.
- 2) Good interpersonal skills- the ability to work with different people and in different teams, and the ability to adapt to changing working environments
- 3) Ability to lead a team and achieve results in a short space of time
- 4) Ability to prioritize time and organize time productively

- 5) Cultivate a willingness to take risks
- 6) An open, positive and practical mindset
- 7) Willingness to learn from a wide cross section of persons.
- 8) Computer literacy and basic numerical skills
- 9) A general knowledge of world and local affairs
- 10) Dress sense, personal grooming and business etiquette
- 11) Awareness of the importance of emotional intelligence.
- 12) Innovativeness
- 13) Ethical Conduct.

There are many obstacles to our universities imparting these core-generic skills. E.g. Having to deal with large numbers of students, lack of resources, lack of conviction that these outcomes should be achieved, paucity in leadership on the part of senior academics, and lack of interest and engagement on the part of junior staff – to name a few. The ultimate result – suboptimal, sub grade products from some faculties.

How may such obstacles be overcome?

Several Faculties and Universities have despite problems, introduced various innovations to achieve these objectives, as we witnessed at a recently held workshop conducted by CART on ‘Pockets of Good Practice’. Some impressive innovations that had worked in the Universities of Colombo, Peradeniya and Moratuwa were presented. Bringing about change is difficult, but some have brought about significant reforms in their Faculties by using innovative teaching styles to expand the range of skills in students

and in doing so improving the teaching skills and enthusiasm of their staff.

The Teacher

A University teacher, ideally fulfils multiple roles – Lecturer, Facilitator of learning, and of confidence building, Role model, Resource material creator, Study guide producer, Curriculum planner, Curriculum evaluator, Student assessor, Mentor, friend and guide, Researcher,

Let me illustrate the difference between a run-of the –mill teacher and the exceptional teacher with a story.

A couple went to a restaurant and ate a delicious dish of garlic mushrooms. It was a small restaurant where the husband did the cooking and the wife served. The couple asked the Madam who was serving for the recipe of the garlic and mushroom dish. Sir, she said with a withering look, **“It is not what, or how, it is who.”** The difference between one dish of garlic mushrooms and another does not depend on the recipe, but on the person who cooked it. Sometimes the beauty of a song does not depend on the song, but on the singer and his rendering of that song.

Much the same is true of the quality of university teaching and university courses. Staff training on good practices in teaching guarantees quality up to a point. But the ‘star’ teacher engages a certain style, quality and commitment to his/her teaching which makes it ever so much more effective. He sings his song and his/her students will remember for ever.

Conceptualizing the purpose of university learning

The manner in which the teacher conceptualizes the purpose of university learning contributes to effective and meaningful learning. E.g. The student could be allowed to feel that he is learning history to pass the 1st, 2nd or final examination in history. Or:-S/he could feel that s/he is learning history to fit into a job that requires knowledge of history. Or:-The student could feel that s/he is learning history to contribute to the economic development of the country.

Context matters

Whatever the course of study, both the teacher and the student have to be clear about the context in which teaching and learning takes place. It is good to ask ourselves as teachers whether this concept of context is embedded in our academic culture. Do we try to relate the student to the environment out there? - The environment of real life that he will be released to?

The cycle of innovations, experimentation, reflection

Teachers learn how to give a good lecture, how to conduct small group teaching, the different ways of assessing students and many other educational techniques, but do they think about how to provide context? Professor Sudharshan Seneviratne, at the recent workshop on 'Pockets of Good practice' said how a large component of the teaching learning experience in the faculty of Archeology at Peradeniya is conducted on site at Anuradhpura, where teachers and students camp on site, interact with the people of that area, do excavations and reports and have lectures and discussions. These students

are provided thus with a sense of Context in their learning. Students are exposed to a host of multidisciplinary studies including geography, management, botany, zoology, chemistry, trade and commerce and life skills etc. The final product is not only a professional archeologist, but a skilled professional who is employable in the tourist industry, travel trade, NGO sector advertising, teaching, as a social worker and many other professional fields.

Context and assessments

The assessments that teachers design could similarly reflect context. E.g. Can history and social sciences students be trained and assessed in critical thinking? Can science students be engaged and assessed on team work?

Can any student doing any subject be taught to write a good report as an assignment?

Can core generic skills be tested side by side with subject matter?

Reflective Teachers

Teachers need to constantly ask themselves these questions. They need to discuss among themselves, they need to try out new innovations, evaluate if the innovation worked, modify it if necessary, and try again. The thinking, reflective experimenting teacher – This is how the teaching experience can help the teacher to learn new skills of teaching.

The Teacher's Environment

There is little value in having great ideas about new ways to help students to learn, if the departmental environment is hostile to their application. New academics soon abandon their

innovatory strategies if their colleagues give them no encouragement to use them. They adapt to the context they find themselves in.

So environment and leadership is important for teachers to learn through teaching. Creating the conditions in which staff feels empowered to help their students involves helping them feel that their work is valued, and praising and supporting their efforts to assist their students, not ignoring or criticizing them. It means helping them to learn from each other.

Good leadership and participatory management help to create an environment for teacher learning and collaborative problem-solving. If teaching helps to make learning possible, educational leadership should help to make effective teaching possible. Proficient academic leadership involves building a shared vision through establishing clear goals, improving communication, and creating challenge in an environment of collaborative decision making and teamwork where each individual feels a responsibility for achieving excellence in teaching and learning. It involves engaging in a conversation or dialogue with teacher. It implies encouraging staff to become involved in the process of evaluating and improving their teaching as a normal part of their work.

Dealing with Deficit

As we all know, students who enter our Universities, are from diverse backgrounds, social groups, ethnic and religious and political leanings. It is important for them to recognize these

differences as a positive feature of university life. In reality many students suffer from a kind of **deficit syndrome**. This feeling is an absolutely destructive one. One of the biggest challenges that face our universities is to deal with this real or perceived deficit.

How can we make all students feel valued? How can we encourage social interaction between diverse groups? **Are the few weeks of orientation we provide sufficient?** Why do we imagine that after these few weeks students have been oriented? Is not deficit building a continuous process? If so, should not orientation be a continuous process?

Study groups, writing groups, team work, could help in making social contact across a multiplicity and diversity of cultural groups.

How many studies have been done in our universities on the feeling of deficit in students? These should provide the key to dealing with it.

If reflective teachers get together and find innovative ways of dealing with deficit, through their teaching, then teachers could also learn while teaching. The YOU and ME of the teacher and the student have to blend.

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REFLECTION ON GIVING FEEDBACK

Dr Enoka Corea, Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo

Concrete experience

The experience I reflected on was an integrated ward class in paediatrics. I was part of a multidisciplinary panel of teachers listening to and commenting on a presentation by final medical students. The medical students presented the history, physical examination, investigation, problem list, management and follow up of an inward patient under their care. The expert panel questioned the students in greater detail and commented on quality of the presentation. The panel, which was seated with the audience for the presentation, moved into a row in front of the students. Questions and feedback took place after the presentation was over. Each panelist took a turn in providing feedback within their own expert areas. In general, the panelists pointed out the shortcomings in the presentation and focused on what the students had done wrong.

Reflection

Reflecting on this experience, in the light of the contents of this unit, I feel that the experience of feedback could have been conducted better. The climate in which the feedback was given was very intimidating. The teachers were arranged in an inquisitorial panel with the students ranged in front. It was obvious that the students were uncomfortable and stressed under direct questioning. By the end of the presentation both students and teachers had forgotten the early slides. Therefore most of the comments and suggestions were of the latter half of the presentation. Even so, the significance of

the comments was lost since the students observing the session had forgotten the original context. The relevance of these comments and suggestions to the whole presentation and to the case itself was lost due to the feedback being fragmented into disciplines. The feedback was largely a one way process with teachers reading through the notes they taken down during the presentation and with little response or explanation from the students. The teachers felt that their responsibility was to point out the mistakes and shortcomings in the presentation. Positive feedback was conspicuous by its absence. Suggestions for change were few. While the teachers meant the feedback to be constructive the students viewed it as being destructive and confidence destroying.

Abstract conceptualization

The climate could have been made more relaxed by the teachers remaining seated in the audience while discussing the case. To ensure that all the students could hear what was going on a microphone could have been used and the teacher could have turned slightly in her seat so as to face the rest of the audience. It would have been more effective if the presentation and the case had been discussed as they unfolded. Aspects regarding the content or the process of the presentation could have been taken up as they occurred and feedback provided immediately. The feedback would have been provided in context and would have been more immediately relevant and significant. The possibility of missing important aspects deserving of feedback would

have been minimized. Since constant interruptions could disturb the presenter this feedback could be provided at appropriate points in the presentation such as after the history or presenting complaint, after the social history etc. By providing immediate feedback, the process could have been converted into a two-way discussion. The student would have had the opportunity to state his/her point of view ensuring that misconceptions were clarified immediately and remedial teaching provided. Each panelist would have become involved as and when data relevant to his/her expertise was brought up and the feedback, though delivered by different teachers, would not have been piecemeal. It would have been useful to involve all the students, including the presenters, in the feedback process to raise self-awareness about performance. By making it interactive the students would have felt they were partners in the process of improving performance. Teachers, including myself, should be trained to give balance feedback, pointing both the positive and negative aspects of student behaviour. Positive feedback would have made students feel good and reinforced good practice. Sadly, the purely negative feedback would have left them anxious and with lowered self-esteem.

Plan for implementation

1. I will change the seating arrangements so that the teachers remain seated along with the students during feedback.
2. I will arrange for feedback to be given during the presentation rather than at the end by informing teachers to identify areas that need further clarification and ask questions and

provide feedback immediately and in context. To do this I will need to get approval from the students to interrupt the presentation from time to time.

3. I will encourage the students to respond to questioning and feedback and provide their own viewpoints. This would not be restricted to the student group responsible for the presentation but include the student observers as well. This will give an opportunity for students to give peer feedback and also help them to clarify the doubts and misconceptions about the content of the presentation.
4. I will inform the students that the goal of feedback is to improve their performance. This will improve student teacher relationships and student learning as they will feel we are all working to a common goal and for the students' benefit.
5. I will request the Staff Development Unit to train teachers in giving positive feedback as well as negative, to ensure that positive behaviours are identified and encouraged as well as the negative ones corrected. Teachers should be trained not to use judgemental language, to be specific in their feedback and to focus on actions rather than personality. I will follow these principles myself whenever I give feedback in a group situation. This could serve as a role model for others.

Feedback is part and parcel of the learning cycle, if detailed and useful can

lead to a change in behaviour and should be considered an integral part of the learning experience.

Reference:

1. Hesketh EA & Laidlaw JM (2002). Developing the teaching instinct, 1: Feedback, *Medical Teacher* 24(3): 245-28.

ABOUT SLAIHEE

SLAIHEE

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

SLAIHEE is a 4-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 conferences held so far were;

| <u>THEME</u> | <u>KEYNOTE SPEAKER</u> |
|--|--|
| <u>First Conference, 2005</u> “Teaching to Put Students First” | Dr Liz Beaty Director-Learning, HEFCE, UK |
| <u>Second Conference, 2006</u> “From Teaching to a Learning Culture - Providing Structures for the Paradigm Shift” | Mr Stephen Cox CFTC Consultant on Staff Dev. |
| <u>Third Conference, 2007</u> “Developing Skills in University Lecturers and Students” | Mr Deepal Sooriyarachchi CEO, Eagle Insurance Co. |
| <u>Fourth Conference, 2008</u> “Using Teaching to Expand Range of Skills Development in Students and Staff” | Professor Lalitha Mendis President, Sri Lanka Medical Association |

(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.