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Sri Lanka Association for Improving Higher Education Effectiveness

What Should Higher Education Provide?

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

OBE and the Future of Higher Education

Prasanna Ratnaweera, Open University of Sri Lanka

Outcome Based Education (OBE) is the latest buzzword in higher education. Spady (1994) explains that “OBE is not a program, a package, a technique, a fad, a quick-fix, a panacea, a miracle or an event, but a transformational way of doing business in education.”

OBE is now promoted by international professional alliances such as the Washington Accord (2013), made of national bodies, to ensure that

national level academic programmes are aligned to meet certain graduate attributes and outcomes. Specifically, the Washington Accord is a curriculum reform process to align learning to industry requirements and to facilitate credit transfer across accredited higher education institutions.

The OBE approach raises three important queries: (1) What do we expect our learners be able to do during and after completing a study

programme? (2) How do we confirm whether they have achieved these competencies? (3) If they have not, what could we do about it?

To answer these questions OBE expects us to (1) formulate explicit learning outcome statements which describe expected learning and (2) to design appropriate activities that scaffold such learning. One could describe such learning outcomes as

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Update on the 11th SDC – SLAIHEE Joint Annual Conference

MB Ariyapala Auditorium, Department of Sinhala, University of Colombo
Friday 26th June 2015

Outcome-based higher education: achievements, challenges and potential

While SLAIHEE conducts activities throughout the year, the highlight is undoubtedly the annual conference which showcases research and innovations in teaching and learning in higher education. The conference crosses all boundaries between disciplines and specialties finding common ground in issues in facilitating learning in higher education.

This year's presentations feature a variety of innovations such as computer based formative

assessment, peer-assisted and cooperative learning, interactive video lecturing, student-centered learning and script concordance testing. Abstracts submitted by academics from universities throughout Sri Lanka were peer reviewed by two reviewers. Accepted abstracts will be presented in two parallel sessions and available in the conference proceedings.

Dr. Gominda Ponnampereuma's keynote speech on “Outcome-

based education: a formula toward holistic education” is timely since the Ministry of Higher Education has recently adopted outcome-based education as its strategy to modernize university curricula in order to produce graduates who have the knowledge, skills and attitudes required for the new millennium.

Conference registration and membership application/renewal have begun. Forms may be obtained by e-mailing slaihee@gmail.com.

Editorial

What should be the aims of higher education today?

The article on Outcome Based Education discusses the goals of OBE and describes key aspects of its implementation and the roles that different stakeholders in higher education should play.

On the other hand, the authors of the *In My Opinion* article worry that higher education is becoming “a mere appendage of the market, rather than a place of creative, unconventional and innovative thinking” and argue for university teacher training to include the socio-political context of education.

What do YOU think should be the aims of higher education today? Why?

Rapti de Silva

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Workshop Reflection: *The Making of Experts*

Srimala Perera, University of Moratuwa

Professor Suki, with his impressive expertise in staff development in the Higher Education sector, facilitated a one day workshop on “The making of experts: Developing experts in what we do and what our students can do,” on March 3rd, with a repeat workshop on the 4th, at the SDC, University of Colombo.

In his pre- workshop introduction, Professor Suki mentioned that “the criticism on the lack of work skills and expertise in our graduates (by employers) and in today’s adults (by the older generations), has served to retain the ‘development of expertise’ to feature at the top of our development and training needs even today”. Often,

these criticisms by employers and the older generation are directed at us, the facilitators of young adults in the higher education system. I always thought that when someone is pointing his/her fingers at us, three fingers are pointing back at them, suggesting that, in this context, the employers and the older generation also have a part to play in developing an individual into an expert. However, when Professor Suki asked “what is the difficulty for us to become expert higher education trainers when we are trained to be attentive to some teaching/learning principles that we can apply in our daily work for developing experts,” I shrank from responding.

Yes, so far I have been just passing the ball. I have not reflected upon the criticism as we were trained to do in the CTHE course. This thought made me immediately register for the workshop. Prior to the workshop we filled an online questionnaire, in which the last question was about various processes that have been used as frameworks to develop expertise across a range of ‘forms’ that industry and higher education have been targeting. Answering that question was challenging for most of us and we realized that we have not updated our knowledge on the latest learning theories.

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Skype Meetings and Call for ExCo Nominations

Late last year the SLAIHEE Executive Committee (ExCo) conducted one of its bi-monthly meetings via Skype. We wanted to test whether the technology would enable participation by someone unable to be physically present at the SDC, Colombo, where meetings are usually held.

There were numerous difficulties with this initial whole committee meeting: many kept losing their connection to the group call; others found their

computers did not have the necessary upgrades to get a clear reception; and some had problems related to using the technology for the first time. Perhaps having so many people on the group call caused some of the problems.

However, the consensus was that if ones computer had the necessary capability, Skype could definitely be used as a way to participate in meetings. Since that trial run, individual members

have participated via Skype when other commitments made travelling to Colombo difficult or impossible.

An added benefit of the ExCo using Skype is that academics from any institution of higher education could now be ExCo members, since distance would no longer limit their participation.

Those interested in being considered for the ExCo should contact the SLAIHEE secretary at slaihee@gmail.com.

In My Opinion

Where have all the teachers gone? The politics of teacher training for university academics

Harshana Rambukwella (PGIE, OUSL), Harini Amarasuriya (OUSL), Dileepa Witharana (OUSL) and Sanjeeva Maithripala (UoP)

Introduction

All four authors of this article recently participated in mandatory induction courses conducted by national universities for their respective academic staff. Although from different disciplinary backgrounds we had broadly similar questions about the place of such teaching practices within the university. We had to confront the uncomfortable question of whether there was an underlying utilitarian principle informing the uncritical promotion of 'new' teaching and learning methodologies. Given the larger context of declining state investment in higher education and the global commodification of education, we asked ourselves 'are these new teaching methodologies part of a larger trend in neo-liberal commodification of education?' This article explores historically established traditions and values of university education to identify how, what we term 'new' teaching methodologies are potentially contributing to the transformation of the university into a limited space of quasi-intellectual exploration with greater emphasis on something very close to vocational training.

The goals of higher education

Martha Nussbaum in *Not for Profit* (2010) makes an erudite argument for the need for higher education to focus on humanistic goals: producing people who are critical, innovative, democratically conscious and unafraid to question and rise above conformism. These core values, argues Nussbaum, are important even from an instrumental capitalist-market oriented perspective, because it is a society of individuals with such values that can innovate and drive change – an obvious counter to the standard criticism that the arts and humanities are of little practical value. Ironically, the Socratic principles of education that Nussbaum propounds in her text are precisely the kind of principles that inform 'new' learner-centered approaches to teaching. Reflection, which draws inspiration from the work of John Dewey (1933), also emerges from an anti-utilitarian vision of education. However, within current education discourse both Socratic classroom practice and reflection become methodologies that target more efficient teacher-learner interactions within often overcrowded and under-resourced university classrooms, seeking to

mass-produce more and more graduates for a marketplace hungry for disciplined and productive bodies and minds.¹

The university teacher, in this context, becomes a mere facilitator and not a creator of knowledge. In contrast, research, dissemination of knowledge, and innovation have been historically central to the vocation of university teaching. Today, the university teacher has increasingly become someone who packages skills and delivers them effectively within the time, resource and institutional constraints imposed by the market. The Socratic classroom in this scenario translates into innocuous group work, and reflection becomes an apolitical activity that is simply limited to reflecting on method. Questions such as 'Am I being a good teacher?' or 'Are my classes well structured?' become the central focus, leaving out reflection on more challenging political and ideological issues. It is such reflection that will produce dissent, non-conformity and ultimately change and innovation – key components in a curious and crucial mind.

Cont. p. 5

"We asked ourselves 'are these new teaching methodologies part of a larger trend in neo-liberal commodification of education?'"

"... the need for higher education to focus on humanistic goals: producing people who are critical, innovative, democratically conscious and unafraid to question and rise above conformism."

Outcome Based Education ... (cont. from p. 1)

“Bloom’s taxonomy also shows learning as an organic process where learners build upon prior learning and experiences”

gaining Knowledge, Attitudes, and Skills, as described in Bloom’s Taxonomy (see Fig. 1, Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). Such competencies may focus on a single domain or span many. Each domain has a hierarchy of learning levels and a goal of OBE is to have learners move up levels.

Bloom’s taxonomy also shows learning as an organic process where learners build upon prior learning and experiences, and not a transmission process akin to pouring a liquid into an empty vessel. No two learners are identical, despite being selected based on standardized competitive examinations. However, competition has resulted in learners taking a strategic achieving approach towards learning rather than a deep learning approach. Such

learners are not motivated intrinsically to learn, preferring to focus on strategies that yield higher grades. In OBE, the skilled teacher works to dissuade such surface learning approaches.

On the other hand, learners are diverse and will approach learning in different ways which may also differ from the teacher’s. In a TED Talk on education, Robinson (2013) says teachers should control the learning climate and not individual learners. OBE encourages peer interaction and shared learning, with little or no control imposed by the teacher, with the goal of making learning more student centered.

The objectives of OBE mesh better with formative assessments than summative ones. OBE confirms scholarship by assessing whether

students have achieved expected competencies. Thus information received during lectures would be of little use to learners unless they help build such competencies. OBE also expects assessment tasks to be aligned well with learning outcomes; thus selecting the right mode of assessment becomes crucial.

Conventional summative assessment methods (i.e. MCQ, structured, structured-essay and essay) have very little use in an OBE context unless they help assess a learner’s ability to apply know-how to a new situation. For example, a Reflective Journal may provide better insight to determine learner engagement in building knowledge, than a Report which is a collection of information.

Cont. p. 7

“The objectives of OBE mesh better with formative assessments than summative ones.”

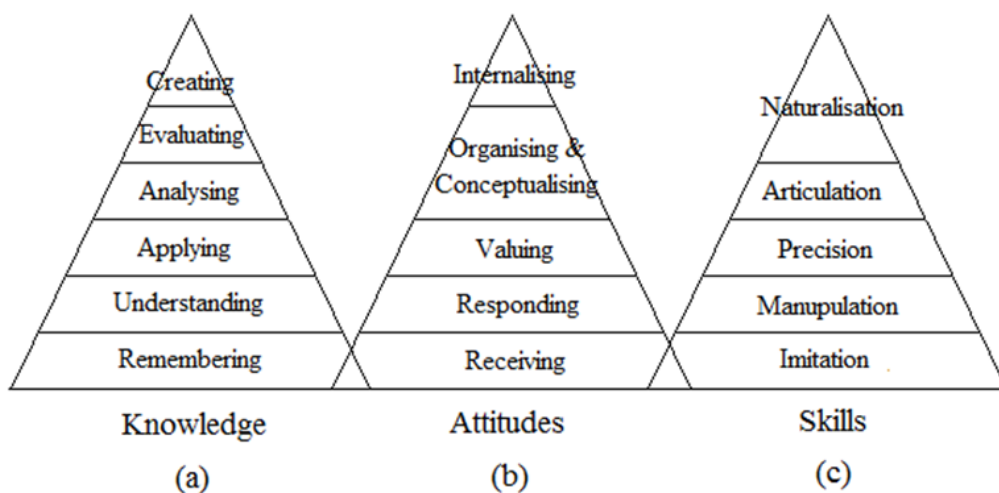


Fig. 1 | Bloom’s Taxonomy: (a) Cognitive (b) Affective and (c) Psychomotor domains. (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001)

Where have all the teachers gone? ... (cont. from p. 3)

The romance of education

In the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire showed that existing education systems serve the hegemonic ends of bourgeois society. Freire argued for a critical pedagogy that examined the social relations within which the pedagogical encounter takes place in order to transform it.

Arguably, student-centered teaching practice and reflective learning practices were influenced by Freire's critical pedagogy. Yet, the heart of Freire's teaching philosophy lies in his politics: the politics of social transformation which Freire argued was the purpose of the encounter between teacher and student. The absence of such a discussion in new teaching methodologies is revealing. New teaching methodologies are premised on the notion of a teacher who is a "competent craftsman" (Pinto et.al 2012, p. 74). Within this discourse, the teacher, the student, as well as the outcomes of education are conceptualised in terms of a set of measurable competencies. This methodology is uncritically presented as the favoured and indeed, the *only* acceptable pedagogical approach. Certainly, there is merit in learning out how to plan teaching effectively and to organize learning sessions on the basis of learning outcomes. Our

discomfort during the training we underwent arose from the lack of space to discuss the social and political relations such teaching encounters engender. Such a learning space arises from an acceptance that teaching is a politically neutral activity which only requires technical competence (see for instance, Finlay 2002; Finlay 2008). Even if we reject as too radical, Freire's understanding of pedagogy as primarily having a transformative potential, teaching is essentially a social encounter. Such encounters are imbued with the social and political processes within which they are institutionalised. Gender, ethnicity, class, ideology, whether we like it or not, will influence how and what we teach. What does it mean when a discussion on teaching methods strips this encounter of its social and political connotations?

New teaching methodologies stress the idea that knowledge is collaboratively constructed through dialogue between the teacher and the student. This is very close to Freire's understanding of the essence of teaching as dialogics and dialogue. Yet also implicit in Freire's pedagogy is the importance of social critique. What Freire terms as problem-posing education stimulates reflection and action on reality: education is an ongoing activity and a

process of becoming. This involves taking humans as historical beings and taking people's historicity as the starting point of their reflections (Freire 1970). In modern parlance, this would read as stimulating critical thinking. But, can critical thinking be stimulated by an ahistorical, apolitical and neutral teacher?

The charismatic and transformative teacher

Another important aspect of new teaching methodologies is learner-centeredness. The teacher is defined as a facilitator and craftsman, framed by the larger logic that the goal of university education is imparting skills that prepare the undergraduate for the employment market. While critical thinking is often invoked as part of this marketable package, the form of critical thinking envisaged here is impoverished. While facilitating conveys a sense of collaborative knowledge production, this depends also to a large extent on the content. When this content is determined by market logic, the extent to which the more emancipatory and humanistic goals of education of Freire, Nussbaum and others can be achieved is questionable.

Even a cursory look at education theory suggests that the definition of a "good teacher" is highly

"Gender, ethnicity, class, ideology, whether we like it or not, will influence how and what we teach."

"Can critical thinking be stimulated by an ahistorical, apolitical and neutral teacher?"

Where have all the teachers gone? ... (cont. from p. 5)

“The curious scientific mind is untiringly questioning and is not satisfied with platitudes or complacent answers.”

contested (Pinto et al. 2012). Three dominant discourses on teaching are the charismatic subject, the competent craftsman, and the reflective practitioner. But as Pinto et al. (2012) argue, these discourses are invariably intermeshed in actual practice and all teachers engage to some degree in all three. A fourth alternative they propose, drawing inspiration from Freire, is that of the transformative teacher who makes the space of teaching into a critical encounter imbued with notions of social justice. However, questioning the normative is not simply a radical political act. Thomas Kuhn (1970) spoke of paradigm changes and how such changes are vital to the progress of science. This is only possible if the normative is relentlessly questioned. The curious scientific mind is untiringly questioning and is not satisfied with platitudes or complacent answers.

Charismatic and transformative teachers we have encountered rarely tended to be methodical in their teaching and were “unprofessional” in the sense of the term today. But it is precisely this non-conformity and their willingness to challenge authority and convention that helped us to cultivate some of these values within ourselves. They were also Socratic in the sense that they used their

charisma to encourage students to question and critique. The inspiration such teaching generates is an affective quality that is not assessable but it is an intangible benefit of learning that can perhaps have more influence on a student than all the measurable learning that taking place within an institutional context.

Conclusion

Within the current professionalisation of teaching and the pressure on university academics to conform to such professionalism, who defines what a good teacher is and how do such definitions relate to the larger political context? The contours of the general discourse on higher education in Sri Lanka are fairly well established. The higher education ministry, officials, some sections of the general public and decision makers in the private sector see Sri Lankan higher education as archaic. Funding for structural reforms in higher education by multilateral donor agencies such as the World Bank also target employability and skills that suit the marketplace. It is within this larger institutional and political context that the new teaching methodologies are being built into the professional practice of university teachers. These changes pose some challenging questions for the future of higher

education. Will higher education become a mere appendage of the market, rather than a place of creative, unconventional and innovative thinking?

¹ The notion of a productive body is drawn from the work of Michel Foucault and his discussion of how institutions, especially education, serve to generate productive individuals who have internalized values that serve capital and the dominant social order (Foucault 1975: 25-26, 210-211)

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“Will higher education become a mere appendage of the market, rather than a place of creative, unconventional and innovative thinking?”

Outcome Based Education ... (cont. from p. 4)

OBE also encourages giving learners a second chance to achieve what they have failed during the first attempt. When learning is coupled with competencies achieved, time no longer becomes a control factor. Some learners have flatter learning curves, i.e. slower learning rates which prevent learners meeting expected goals within a limited time. Many universities in the west provide a mechanism for such learners to negotiate for extra time, without compromising their grades. This seems a better approach than universities that focus on assessment that is primarily summative, and usually within a fixed period of time.

In OBE, Programme Educational Objectives refer to outcomes learners should demonstrate after graduation. Most real world issues require inter-disciplinary inputs to address socio-economic and environmental concerns. Degree accreditation institutions place a greater emphasis on learners' ability to work in teams and their ability to work with individuals having expertise in related disciplines. Nurturing sound work ethics and attitudes in learners is a programme educational objective frequently discussed in modern curricula. OBE expects learners to internalise such values associated with the learning

outcomes. Internalising is the highest competency level in the affective domain (see Fig. 1).

Spady's phrase "a transformational way of doing business in education" makes OBE a trend that sparks controversy among stakeholders of higher education. Many teachers think this transformation does not require a change in pedagogy, but see this as an exercise to align current practices to the OBE framework. However, this is not the case.

Implementing OBE requires institutions to recognise the need for structural changes that elevate the programme of study over existing discipline based divisions and to provide learners with required infrastructure support. In addition, the industry is required to make learners aware of current and future trends and to assist integration of on-the-job training to achieve programme objectives.

Finally, OBE builds on the premise that learning needs to be relevant, active, flexible, affordable and democratic. A student body that safeguards and promotes these values as well as those values stipulated in OBE seems a necessity. Using other stakeholders as proxies to safeguard one's interests seems an out-dated concept in today's context.

For example, today, the European Students' Union, a federation of national student unions of the EU, is a consultative member of the Bologna Process, the European initiative to ensure comparability in standards and the quality of higher education qualifications. The Federation of Teacher Unions is also a consultative member.

Will OBE become the next turning point in Sri Lanka's higher education?

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"OBE expects learners to internalise values associated with outcomes."

"OBE builds on the premise that learning needs to be relevant, active, flexible, affordable and democratic."

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Workshop Reflection ... (cont. from p. 2)

However, the e-mail sent by Professor Suki a day before the workshop put us at ease. He said that he was going to use Bloom's taxonomy, which most of us were familiar with, as a developmental framework to 'dip and pick' in the process of working towards developing a variety of expertise in ourselves or in our students. Further, he sent us an article on transitions and trajectories for studies of expertise and suggested that we read the opening paragraph as a starting point to address this complex topic.

The following day we all participated in the workshop enthusiastically. While the day unfolded

with lots of valuable insights, at one point of the workshop discussions I realized the importance of Professor Suki's ground preparation (mentioned above) for the workshop, which brought participants who had different levels of understanding of this complex topic to a similar level. It was the highlight of the day for me as I understood that this is in fact an essential practice missing in my own teaching approach towards developing experts.

Another interesting area discussed that day was the T-D-A model (Transition-Development-Achievement) of curriculum development, in which Professor Suki further discussed the use

of teaching, learning and assessment rubrics.

Although our understanding in the area of developing experts was enhanced throughout the day, the complexity of the topic gave almost all participants a feeling of an abrupt end since we still had many questions. At the end of the day we all agreed that a one day workshop is not adequate to cover this complex topic. Professor Suki was very kind to offer another workshop to further enhance our knowledge on this subject. However, as his availability in Sri Lanka is limited, he suggested that as an alternative he will continue facilitating the journey of making an expert online.

On Campus: Upcoming Staff Development (June-Aug)

Staff Development Centers at all Sri Lankan institutions of higher education are invited to submit details of **activities related to improving teaching and**

learning that will take place during the next quarter (September - November).

All SDCs were emailed

requesting information on relevant upcoming staff development. But none were submitted.

Submissions to the SQ

Readers are encouraged to submit to the following categories:

Action Research / Reflective Practice (maximum 1000 words): Share your efforts to improve teaching and/or learning! Appropriate

respondents will be invited to reflect on the activities in the light of relevant scholarship.

In My Opinion (maximum 1000 words): Express your opinions on aspects/issues relevant to higher education!

Letters to the Editor (maximum 250 words)

Cartoon Corner: Share your humorous takes on education while displaying your artistic talents!

Please email your submissions to
editorSLAIHEEQ@gmail.com

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