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Investigating Learning Challenges faced by Students in Higher Education

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Abstract

This research investigates learning challenges faced by students in Higher Education. The population of the study consisted of undergraduates, postgraduates and instructors in a School of Education in a selected university in the United States of America. The researchers adopted qualitative approach which involved the use of questionnaire, interview, and document analysis to triangulate the data. The sample population comprised 181 undergraduate and postgraduate students and 22 instructors from the School of Education. Questionnaires using a 6 point Likert-scale were administered to all 203 respondents whilst interviews were conducted with 5 undergraduates, postgraduates and instructors. In addition, document analysis was also conducted on the syllabus used for the 12 courses. Data analyses indicated eight main learning challenges faced by students in higher education namely: cognitive challenge, becoming an active learner, coping with reading materials, instructional problem, language barrier, time management, burden of assignments, and culture difference in higher education. Based on the findings, it was suggested that higher learning institutes should emphasize on the construction of knowledge through active interaction between lecturer and the students which became a platform for the students to cope up with the learning challenges they were facing in higher education.

1. Introduction

It is undeniably true that every higher education institution wants to boast that it offers ‘high quality learning and teaching’. Mission statements consistently claim that universities and colleges seek to provide excellent teaching and

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a high quality learning environment. However, it is less than obvious that institutions are either clear about what these goals mean or actually pursuing these goals with strategic vision. In most cases neither of these key goals is well defined: what is excellent teaching and what constitutes a high quality learning environment? The manner in which institutions are attempting to achieve these goals is many and varied (D’Andrea & Gosling, 2005:1). Attempts to turn the rhetoric into reality are seen as improvements to the teaching and learning process in higher education to further assist students to address their learning challenges. In fact, many of the goals that are seen as ends, as improvements in teaching and learning, are only means to a higher-level goal. D’Andrea & Gosling (2005:25) listed the following sets of goals for enhancing teaching-learning:

- Active learning
- Deep learning
- Diversifying assessment
- Learner-managed learning
- Peer review of teaching
- Personal development planning
- Problem-based learning
- Scholarship of teaching and learning
- Student-centred learning
- Using learning technologies
- Work-related learning

2. Literature Review

Angelo (1995) in turn proposed a useful model to clarify what goals a particular teaching or assessment strategy is designed to achieve and also to address learning challenges faced by students in higher education. In fact, he stressed that the Teaching Goals Inventory should include higher-order thinking skills; basic academic success skills; discipline-specific knowledge and skills; liberal arts and academic values; work and career preparation as well as personal development. The desired outcomes needed for the 21st century graduates as well as the lifelong skills and values to be possessed by every educated person have been identified in systematic way by a researcher in his study conducted in Philippine (de Guzman, 2006:49-50). As a mnemonic device and at the same time a strategy to synthesize the characteristics that would align with the university’s mission to develop teachers for a better world, the attributes were sequentially arranged to make up the word E-M-P-O-W-E-R-E-D, which the group of respondents in de Guzman (2006) feels is the kind of teachers needed for social transformation:

- E - xercises effective communication
- M - anifests professional competence
- P - ossesses adequate knowledge of the discipline
- O - bserves professional ethics
- W - elcomes progressive innovation and change
- E - xhibits a deep sense of nationalism with a global outlook
- R - adiates a caring attitude for others
- E - ngages in problem solving and decision making
- D - emonstrates personal integrity

Somehow, this strategy has provided a clear picture of the kind of teachers Philippine Normal University wants to develop. Under the similar circumstance, Boud (2000) highlighted that such an endeavour in education not only calls for formative and ‘sustainable assessment’ but also effective learning that could address learning challenges in higher education. He cautions that current assessment in higher education does not fully prepare students for lifelong learning and holistic development. Hence, Boud & Falchikov (2005) suggested that we need to move from summative assessment that focuses on specifics, standards and immediate outcomes to more sustainable assessment that can aid students to become more active learners not only in managing their own learning but also assessing
themselves beyond the end of the course. They further added that there had been considerable critique on the adequacy of current formative assessment and summative assessment. Boud & Falchikov (2005) highlighted that most of the critique focused on the effect on learning within courses not on learning following graduation. They note that what is important is to strike a balance between formative and performance-based assessment procedures in order to overcome the limitations of traditional unseen summative and norm-referenced standardized tests. Formative assessment refers to assessment at regular intervals of a student's progress with accompanying feedback in order to improve the student's performance. However, one also has to bear in mind that formative assessment is an investment both in terms of time and resources and hence, academia have to take proactive steps to ensure it can be implemented in such a way that it is authentic and improves student learning in a holistic manner. By integrating formative assessment to enhance active and transformative learning, then we might be able to address many learning challenges faced by students in higher education and to produce better graduates in the higher learning institutes.

3. Research Method

The study adopted a qualitative approach to collect data of learning challenges faced by students in higher education. The very strength of qualitative discourse is its exploratory nature. In this study, the researcher used open ended questions in the questionnaire, interview questions, and document analysis to collect data. The sample population comprised 181 undergraduate and postgraduate students and 22 instructors from the School of Education. Questionnaires using a 6 point Likert-scale were administered to all 203 respondents whilst interviews were conducted with 5 undergraduates, postgraduates and instructors. In addition, document analysis was also conducted on the syllabus used for the 12 courses. Before the researcher embarked on the study, the researcher had to apply to the Office of Research Administration to obtain the exempt research status and pass the CITI Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative Test. The researcher was granted exemption and approval for the research titled “Current Practices of Assessment in Higher Education” from the Office of Research Administration. After exemption had been granted, the researcher identified the relevant courses and instructors from the university online course schedule, to distribute the questionnaire. The researcher identified the classes which had more than 10 students to be selected randomly for the study to ensure a better response rate. Following this, the researcher wrote to the relevant instructors to seek permission to enter their classes to conduct interviews. For each course instructor, the researcher ensured that not more than three attempts to contact were made and the contact attempts were only made after every five days. The data collected was validated by a senior professor in the particular university. The interviews were only being conducted in the classroom with the permission of the relevant lecturer. The researcher tried his very best to assure respondents that all their responses would be treated with the strictest confidence. In addition, the researcher also promised to destroy all the interview scripts at the end of the study.

4. Findings

The data was collected using open-ended questions, interview and document analysis. The data was triangulated to enhance the reliability of the data. Basically the answers provided by respondents (Table 1) indicated that there were eight common challenges faced by students in higher education namely: cognitive challenge, becoming an active learner, coping with reading materials, instructional problem, language barrier, time management, burden of assignments, and culture difference in higher education. However, a total of 7 students (3.68%) out of the 190 students who returned their questionnaires stated that they had no major problems in their learning. Another 63 students (33.16%) did not provide any response.

Table 1. Main Challenges Faced by Students in Higher Education.

| Main Challenges                | Frequency | Percent |
|-------------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Cognitive Challenge           | 32        | 16.84   |
| Becoming An Active Learner    | 26        | 13.68   |


### 4.1 Cognitive Challenge

Cognitive challenge is the most critical challenge faced by most of the students in higher education. A total of 32 students (16.84%) highlighted the issue of cognitive challenge in their learning. It can be understood that students’ cognitive level should be developed at a higher level when they enter university. When students are in university, they must think scholarly and write academically. Interviews with the three instructors confirmed this opinion. One of the instructors interviewed mentioned that “students need to equip themselves with the relevant knowledge by reading and asking questions. If they are not willing to take up the challenge, they won’t be able to excel in higher education”. Another instructor stressed that “normally postgraduate students are more independent and matured compared with undergraduate students, they know what they want and they are all self-motivated and hardworking.” The expectation in learning varies from bachelor degree, to master degree and doctoral degree. Doctoral students face the highest challenge at the cognitive level compared to master and bachelor degree students. A few doctoral students voiced their concern regarding abstract concepts in their courses. For example, four students out of 15 students in the course of Qualitative Inquiry in Education found it difficult to understand some qualitative research concepts such as ‘meaning field’, ‘validity horizon’, ‘role analysis’, ‘power analysis’ and ‘interactive sequence’. Some students also mentioned it was difficult to differentiate between the concept of objectivity, subjectivity, normativity and mixed categories in terms of validity horizon. Two students also highlighted the concept of ‘paradigmatic’ and ‘syntagmatic’ were also difficult to be understood in terms of text analysis in qualitative research.

Hence, in order to do well in their study, postgraduate students have to invest a lot of time and energy to prepare for their class. A doctoral student voiced his concern of doing ethnography field work as “a tough skill that I am still developing skills in it”. A doctoral student further illiterate that his challenge to write thesis in this way: “it is very much like putting everything that you learned in the past few years into writing”. Recalling whatever that have been learned to be synergized into writing is a great challenge to most of the master and doctoral students. One of the doctoral students confided during the interview that, “understanding the theory is one thing, but integrating the theory into research is another thing”. Hence, putting theory into practice is considered as a great challenge to most of the students at the postgraduate level.

Besides that, sorting out their own biases in the interpretation of concepts is also considered another great challenge among most postgraduate students (> 80%). Postgraduate students need to learn to be objective in thinking and acquire scientific skills in interpreting data. Two postgraduate students interviewed stated that they must learn not to over exaggerate the data collected in their study. One of the instructors interviewed also mentioned that he also reminded his student to be honest with the data collected. Overall, postgraduate students stated that they need to work hard to understand the concepts taught in the class and apply it wisely in their study. Two doctoral students told that sometime they need to read more than once to understand the chapter or article given by the instructor. Two master students even mentioned that: “certain issues pertaining to content was at first confusing but was made clearer over time due to no theoretical background in the study”.

Understanding concept is a great challenge for most of the students in higher education from bachelor to doctorate degree. Three of the instructors interviewed emphasised this point of view. A total of 11 undergraduate students stated the challenges of understanding the concepts taught in their program. According to two of the students interviewed, undergraduate students normally face the challenge of coordinating the content to their future
profession. Since undergraduate students are new in the area of study, normally they are facing many cognitive challenges ranging from understanding the historical perspective of the field, the professor’s perspective, new concepts taught, application aspects of the theory, the arguments from many different scholars in the subject and so on. Based on questionnaires responses, majority of the students (> 80%) stated their challenges at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels are as follow:

- a lot of new concept
- a lot of new vocabulary
- a lot of reading
- some of the readings are written at a very scholarly level
- no foundation in the area of study

4.2 Becoming an Active Learner

Becoming an active student was considered as a second critical challenge faced by most of the students in higher education. A total of 26 students (13.62%) claimed that it is not easy to become an active learner in the classroom. First of all, they need to prepare for the class in order to be active in the discussion. All the ten students interviewed stated they need to spend at least 2 to 3 hours to prepare for a class; otherwise, they won’t be able to participate in the classroom discussion. The scenario is the same for both undergraduate and postgraduate students. They have to be self-motivated to monitor their own learning so that they are more prepared in the class. The other reasons why some students do not become active learners are mainly due to personal reasons such as:

- they do not talk that much (n=3)
- they do not consider themselves as leaders in the group (n=4)
- they are not interested with the topic (n=5)

One of the instructors interviewed stated that the term “active learner” needs to be interpreted carefully. Active learning not only entailed active involvement in the classroom discussions or activities, but also meant students engagement in thinking and learning. If a student has been attentively participating in a class but did not talk or say anything, he or she can still be considered as an active learner. Hence, the meaning of active learner varies according to the interpretation of different personnel. The findings also indicated that active learning is not a magic solution in higher education. A total of 32 students (16.84%) stated in their questionnaires that actually active learning is not suitable for all students and all courses. Some students still prefer passive learning more than active learning. Three students stated in their questionnaires that they do not like active learning. Two out of ten students interviewed voiced their concern of preferring more lecture than having too much of classroom discussion and presentation. The reason given is they want to learn from the instructor especially in the course that was more technical oriented. During the interviews, one student also pointed out that students are not able to be active in some courses that are technical oriented like “Educational Assessment and Psychological Measurement”. Hence, listening to the instructor’s lecture is more meaningful than just discussing general issues. Furthermore, the student stated that the two projects that they were doing; “Attitude Scale Construction” and “Writing Achievement Test Items” are lengthy and contained too many details that are more suitable to be presented in written format instead of presentation in the class.

4.3 Coping with Reading Materials

A total of 17 students (8.95%) from the 190 respondents stated that coping with reading materials is a challenge to many undergraduate and postgraduate students. 17 students from the group indicated that it is not easy to finish all the assigned readings each week. According to the information provided by the three undergraduate and three postgraduate students in the interviews, the amount of reading material was overwhelming. Normally, a course requires at least four to five articles to be read each week, and a student registers for six courses in a semester.
Hence, the amount of reading materials is huge and not easily handled by any student. The three instructors in the interviews further confirmed this matter and emphasised that there are many articles distributed after each class and the students are reminded to read the relevant materials from the OnCourse websites from time to time. One of the instructors stressed that he always allocated one hour for the students to raise questions and discuss the reading materials in the class. Another instructor confirmed the statement and stated that she always asked her students to post questions relating to the reading materials for all the students to discuss in the websites and in the class.

4.4 Language Barrier

In terms of language problem, it was cited as a main concern among international students. A total of 13 out of 54 international students (24.1%) involved in the study pointed out that there were a lot new vocabularies in most of their classes. They had to refer to dictionary very regularly to understand the meaning of the terms introduced in the class. Three international students even stated that English is a problem for most of them in the interview because English is a second language or a foreign language in their home countries; hence it is difficult for them to catch up with their lessons. According to three of the international students interviewed, they were also having problems to express their ideas in the class. They found that their expressions were always not clear to other students in the class.

4.5 Instructional Problem

A total of 13 students (6.84%) voiced their concern of instructional problems in their classes. These students were from two different courses. In the first incident, six students stated the ambiguity of the syllabus provided by their instructor in a course. According to them, the instructor did not state his expectation clearly and deliver his lectures systematically. Furthermore the feedback provided was also not clear, and materials taught were not tested. They found that there was no way to improve their learning based on the feedback. In the second incident, seven students stated that their classes were always disorganized, and the structure of the materials was not clearly presented. Two of the students interviewed suggested that they would rather have a better well informed time table than a volatile classroom situation. They agreed that a good classroom management would definitely promote better learning motivation among the students.

4.6 Time Management

Ten students (5.26%) pointed out this problem in the open-ended section in the questionnaires. Even though this problem was also raised by undergraduate students, however this problem was more critical among the postgraduate students who were also working part time or full time. Many working postgraduate students (7 out of 10) stated the biggest challenge they faced was to balance coursework and their work in the questionnaires. An instructor interviewed agreed with this statement. According to this instructor who taught mostly postgraduate students, his students were struggling to find time for their study after their work and fulfilling family commitments. He found that his students were always rushing for class and rushing back home or to the office. Besides that, a total of three doctoral students and two master students revealed in the interviews that they were facing a challenge to strike a balance between time spent on other courses and their job.

4.7 Assignment Burdens

Seven students (3.68%) stated that they were having assignment burden as a challenge. This challenge is no exception between undergraduate and the postgraduate students. Two of the postgraduate students interviewed stated some courses as having too many assignments. For example, one of the courses attended by them had nine mini assignments and another course had six small assignments. Even though all the assignments were small in scale and some were not graded, but they were all still a burden because they had to spend a lot of time to read up the relevant materials to understand the requirements of each assignment. An undergraduate student in the interview confessed that she had many assignments to be completed in a semester. Basically, an undergraduate who signed up for six courses had roughly 30 small assignments to be completed in a semester. Therefore, the burden of
Assignment is a big challenge to most students in higher education. On the other hand, all the instructors confirmed that using many mini assignments to assess students was more effective than using one or two big projects because the instructor would have more interaction opportunities with the students and the instructor could also provide better feedback to students in all the small steps of completing a bigger task in a particular course.

4.8 Culture Differences

Even though culture differences were only stated by two respondents (1.05%) in the questionnaires, it is a significant issue among international students. International students were having problems to catch up with certain topics that were unique to the United States culture. During the interviews, three international students pointed out that they were not able to associate with the active classroom culture because they had different learning experiences in their home countries prior to seeking an education in the United States. In their home country, normally, the instructors were more active in the classroom and the students were expected to listen and take notes. Asking question was considered rude and not respecting the instructor. However, they also voiced their concern of trying to assimilate with the local culture in the United States. Two of the instructors interviewed mentioned that they had to call the students’ name to make them active in the classroom discussion otherwise they prefer not to talk. However, the instructors found all these students were well prepared for the class and they were well informed as to what was going on during the class discussion.

5. Discussion

The findings have shown significant result obtained from the open-ended section in the questionnaires, interviews and document analysis. The students of higher education expressed that they had to face several challenges in their higher education years. The participants felt that they were having difficulties cognitively, in becoming an active learner, in coping with reading materials, in language barriers, in instructional, in time management, in assignment burdens and in cultural differences. A total of 16.84% of the participants highlighted the issue of cognitive challenge in their learning where it is found that students’ cognitive level should be developed at a higher level when they enter university. According to Lawton and La Porte (2013), adult learners involve in their learning actively in acquiring knowledge. For example, transformative learning in the higher education requires the learners to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience in order to guide future action, by using one’s prior interpretation (Mezirow, 1991, p.12 as cited in Lawton and La Porte, 2013). On the other hand, 13.62% claimed that it is not easy to become an active learner in the classroom because they need to spend at least 2 to 3 hours to prepare for a class; otherwise, they won’t be able to participate in the classroom discussion actively. According to Salama (2010), it is common for the learners to relate theories to their learning during discussion if they are prepared and this will help in guiding them to build the relationship between the theories and the examples in their learning. However, it is always easy to say than to do it. Moreover, a few students had described that they were having the problems in assignment burdens (3.68%) and cultural differences (1.05%). When being interviewed, students also pointed out that some courses have too many assignments. Undeniably, assignments give information about the students’ development in the learning and information on how to improve the course, and also help the teacher to select suitable materials for teaching practices, but it has to be at reasonable number (Ismail, 2005).

Besides, only 1.05% students agreed that cultural differences are their main challenge and this came from the international students in the institution. During the interview, the participants stated that most of their problems were language barrier in which the English Language which was used among the majority was their second language instead of their mother tongue. A study done by Mustafa et al. (2007) on the comparison of anxiety among college students found out that the Philippines and the Turkishes had the highest level of anxiety when compared to the Americans. This shows that the sense of belonging to the institution does play a vital role in assisting the students to adapt to the challenge of cultural differences.
6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings showed that the students were concerned about instructional problems in their classes. Effective institutions are seen to employ collaborative approaches such as take responsibility for the condition of learning, and encourage instructors to develop appropriate teaching strategies for students, place high but realistic expectations on students, value learning outcomes consistent with discipline knowledge, have high levels of care for students’ welfare, and value creation or construction of new ideas (Hall and Ramsay, 1994). Thus, the notion of facilitating and nurturing the development of children is reinforced as an expectation for both instructors and learning institutions. According to McGee (1994: 81), there is “a strong tradition of child-centered learning in New Zealand primary schools through tertiary education, with associated concepts of individualized learning and holistic learning”. Deep, transformational learning is prized and this is meant to be achieved through experience, discovery, social interaction, and individualized challenges.

Interestingly, the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) also foster the same passion of excellent teaching in their university to address learning challenges among the students in higher education. The university has compiled the collective voices of their excellent teachers and make explicit the principles that inform the teaching of these excellent teachers. The whole framework indicates the emphasis on the interaction of teaching and learning to address learning issues. The CUHK identified that feedback is only useful if the teacher reflects upon it and makes use of the information to improve teaching and the curriculum. Continual reflection and refinement of teaching are one of the hallmarks of an excellent teacher (Kember et al., 63). Hence, university education should not be the same as secondary education. The findings in CUHK advocate that students should not only know how to answer questions, but also how to ask questions. Students are learning not only to get credits but also how to face the data, observable phenomenon and decision-making. Reading through these accounts, one cannot avoid noticing the one pervasive trait common to all the excellent teachers portrayed – they are reflective about their own teaching and they constantly seek to learn and improve the learning of their students.

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