

Creating a Meaningful Space to Learn via Learners' Engagement in Professional Development Classes

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Abstract: This study investigates learners' reflections on learning engagement via hands-on learning experiences in conducting seminars on Professional Development. Ten students were given open ended questionnaire to describe their perspectives and views on learning engagement while planning, organizing and implementing their Professional Development class seminars. In addition, another seven students were also interviewed to obtain their personal accounts and description on the experiences of positive learning engagement and impact on their learning. Three lecturers who had taught the course were also interviewed. The findings revealed that the trainee teachers were highly engaged in learning by demonstrating learning engagement as experiencing meaningful learning, experiencing planning on your feet', working and learning collaboratively as a group, generating funds and developing linkage with others. Both the students and lecturers perceived the seminar and the course favourably, citing that it provided opportunities for hands-on and meaningful learning experiences where they gained essential life skills related to leadership, entrepreneurship, decision-making, teamwork and also communication skills. Based on the findings, it is suggested that universities could create various opportunities of meaningful learning spaces by encouraging learners' engagement creatively. Among this is embedding practical and experiential learning experiences cum spaces beyond the traditional means of teaching and learning in the classroom.

Key words: Learning engagement • Meaningful learning spaces • Professional development • Trainee teacher

INTRODUCTION

As far back as in 1908, G. Herbert Palmer described the 'Ideal Teacher' as having these four attributes; wealth of knowledge and experience, ability to invigorate life through learning, an aptitude for vicariousness-propensity to imagine and live through others' perspectives and experiences, and the readiness to be forgotten where one has the growth capacity that continues even when one has left the teaching profession [1]. An excellent teacher then according to Cook-Sather, must situate themselves within the learning situation and process by inviting the students to draw on their knowledge and own learning experiences. Knowledge then is said to be 'constructed' in such learning process and engagement where the center of learning now has shifted from the teacher to the learner. In other words, the locus of control in learning is in the student and among the students. This is the premise on what makes a meaningful space to learn. The teacher ought to take a

back seat while staying dynamic, eclectic and playing an active role of guiding, facilitating and distancing themselves (where needed) in the whole process of teaching and learning.

Literature Review: Recent studies on learning engagement defined engagement as where there are active involvement, commitment and sense of belonging towards the time and effort taken by the students to complete an educational activity [2]. Student centered teaching is undeniably the way to enhance learners' engagement [3]. Cavanagh [4] stated that students who contribute enthusiastically in lectures retain information longer than they simply see or hear it. Though lectures continue to be the major method of instruction in classroom learning, activities that rely on group work, small group discussions and group tasks encourage active learning where students not only re-engage with the content but also maximized their learning by relating to authentic tasks while reflecting on how knowledge is used in real life

situations [4]. He too added that in these learning situations, students are not only engaged because of experiential learning but they too take greater responsibility for their learning. Thus this study then seeks to explore and investigate to what extent learners are engaged in learning in organizing and implementing their Professional Development seminars.

Learning Engagement and Creating a Meaningful Space to Learn: Constructing a meaningful and creative learning space is more than just a technological feat. It entails an amount of sensitivity towards not just the learners' physical needs and psychological needs but also what makes up a supportive and collaborative community [5]. Beyond the physical space like the environment and the class setting, learners too must be allowed to have a positive regard of themselves throughout the learning process. This is in line with Roger's [6] position on positive regard where learner's inherent dignity and potential will create the psychological space required in making meaningful learning engagement.

Trowler and Trowler [7] put forth the fact that the value and importance of engagement is linked to the clear connection it made between students' involvement in their own learning and positive learning outcomes from learning. Learning engagement is defined as the degree to which a learner is meaningfully involved in the learning process and the perceived value a learner attribute to the learning taking place [8, 9]. Newmann [10] described engagement as "involving participation, connection, attachment, and integration in particular settings and tasks" (pp.217. Chad [2]) reiterated the fact that learners' engagement reflects active involvement and commitment of the students coupled with having a strong sense of belonging in dictating students' time, effort thus devotion to educational activities. Auken [7] suggested that engagement is critical in any learning process since when more students are engaged with a subject, the more they tend to learn about it. He too proposed that that learners' engagement represents two critical features; the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other educational activities; and how the institution organizes the curriculum, learning opportunities that induce students to participate in activities that bring the desired learning outcomes, satisfaction and experience.

This notion in particular is related to elements of active learning or active participation in some form of learning activities or tasks. In relation to this, Race [11] stated that 'doing' is one of the important elements for successful learning. The way to do this and encourage

such experience and learning engagement is by student centered teaching [3]. In addition, Paladino in Chad [2] argued that though lectures could stimulate knowledge capture and comprehension, there is no progression to learning until students actually apply this knowledge. This is where lecturers are expected to structure their course design, learning activities and outcomes so as to facilitate learners' development and learning [12].

In doing this, learning by doing or better known as experiential learning provides a way to promote learning engagement. Illeris [13] proposed that for anyform of learning to be labelled as experiential, the learning process and outcome must have continuity (relating to past experience) and interaction (with the environment) with having at least some form of learner control and the learner's involvement of self. In addition, He too believed that learning should make some connections from the learning environment to the real environment.

The Context: EDU 630 (Professional Development)

Course Aims and Structure: EDU630: Professional Development (PD) is a compulsory course for all final year students at the Faculty of Education, MARA University of Technology. It is a course that covers a breadth of areas highlighting the roles and expectations of teachers, the challenges of the teaching profession and the importance of continuous professional and personal development. At the end of the course, each class is required to conduct a PD seminar. The seminar could address any issue or topic or theme chosen by the students that relates to teacher professional development. Speakers are usually invited to share their knowledge and experiences with the students. This accounts for up to 30% of their final grade. Other graded assessments include presentations, personal essay and reflective journal detailing their personal reflections on the whole process of organising their PD seminar and how that relates to what has been learned and discussed in class. The lecturers' role is to facilitate and monitor students by offering advice and guidance along the way.

Methodology

Research Objective: This study then seeks to explore and investigate to what extent learners are engaged and benefitted in carrying out the professional development class seminars.

Methodology: The design of this study is exploratory in nature where the informants were asked several questions via email and interviews. Seven former students who had

taken the course and recently graduated (two years or less) were selected as informants. Three students were project managers of their respective PD seminars while the other four were selected based on their role and function as high committee members. Three lecturers who had taught the course were also chosen as informants. Arrangements were made with the informants before the questions were sent to them via email. Interviews were done basically to explore and probe deeper. These informants were asked to reflect on their own learning experiences when doing their fundraising activities and on the process of organising their PD seminars. Data were solely gathered in the form of the informants' reflections from the written responses via email correspondence as well as from the interview. The data then were analysed qualitatively by thematic analysis.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Four emerging themes. Learning engagement was seen by the informants in different forms. Four emerging themes reflected learning engagement as in 'experiencing meaningful learning', 'working and learning collaboratively as a group', 'generating funds', and 'developing linkage with others/outsideers.

Experiencing meaningful learning. These learners concurred on the fact that learning in these Professional Development (PD) classes were deeply engaging. Learning in this manner was said to provide for meaningful learning. Meaningful as one of the learners mentioned, in the sense that the activities allowed her to do and perform some tasks and responsibilities, while learning in class only allowed her to present and learn about theories. One informant also reiterated how she learned by doing and not 'picking up' from readings or textbooks. She mentioned that *"...you know when we plan and conduct the seminar, it is all about doing...like mmm...inviting the speakers, we have to identify, make appointment to meet and book them, write letters...many works to do...so different from reading books"*.

In line with this, Race [11], clearly explained that 'doing' is one of the important elements for successful learning. Rogers, in Cavanagh [4] promoted the fact that this form of learning which is experiential in nature has a quality of personal involvement where the feeling and the cognitive aspects of an individual are both present in the learning event. In other words, by doing and being personally involved in planning and organizing the

seminar, these students were learning experientially, thus were also deeply engaged in learning. Another informant suggested that learning in this class made learning become practical and meaningful. He said, *"...yes, I felt related and connected to those experiences, like in real life situations...like I'm already working."*

Such value put forth by this learner concurred with Trowler [9] and Marcum's [8] perspective on how value attained in the process of learning made learning itself as something meaningful. In addition, the lecturers too contended that such tasks or activities provided for experiential learning where the students were able to *"play out in real-life situations"*, as mentioned by one of them.

Another point of importance is that learning was said to be engaging and meaningful because the learning was done in context. One of the lecturers mentioned how the context of planning an event provided for the context of learning in this class. She said, *"...they learned well when they planned and carried out the seminar. It is like they are working as managers, financial officers or even as secretaries...working in their small groups...taking charge of their responsibilities."* What this actually suggests is that students learn well when a learning situation or activity is problem based or in other words, when they used actual cases and authentic situations. Krain in Auken [7] argued that actual cases are useful for helping students to see how real world complex problems get solved and how theories are connected and linked to practice. Chad [2], explained that though lectures could stimulate knowledge capture and comprehension, there is no progression to learning until students actually apply this knowledge.

Students in this study were seen to be highly engaged in their learning when they planned and ran the whole seminar on their own. Cavanagh [4] aptly described this as a learning experience that encouraged students to take responsibility for their learning where learning is said to be maximized when tasks are authentic and reflected upon by the learners.

Working and Learning Collaboratively as a Group: The informants in this study too described themselves as being engaged when they collaborated and worked with each other as a team. Working as a team became a vehicle for them to make the seminar a success. As stated by one of the lecturers, *"...learning this way gave them a chance to collaborate and help each other, learn from each other and help those who seemed to be slow or not knowing what had to be done."* A student described how

he felt unhappy with some of his friends whom he considered as 'free riders' but he pushed those issues aside since working as a team meant that the success of the seminar overrode his sentiments and thus they continued working as a team.

Team learning as explained by Chad [2] allows for acquisition of knowledge from different sources. He further stated that such learning situation enables students to learn from each other and allows for better interactions among themselves. In addition, all of the three lecturers teaching this course agreed that the course had not only enhanced the students' ability to plan and run the seminar but also their management and organization skills, their negotiations skills, communication and leadership ability, and their ability to formulate creative ideas and alternative solutions thus their decision making skills as a group. As one of the lecturers said, "...they work in groups...thus giving them the experience of being in a team environment." She further added, "What is important is not only the outcome but also the process. Mistakes and errors are all valued learning curves in this process."

Thus, this learning activity allows for active involvement, commitment and a sense of belonging or ownership to learning. Such attributes, are what Chad [2] had termed as having high learning engagement. In this respect, Biggs, in Cavanagh [4] reiterated the fact that teaching through collaborative problem-solving tasks develops deep approaches to learning among students.

Generating Funds: Generation of funds and conducting the entrepreneurship activities were among the core activities agreed by all the informants to have facilitated and engaged them to work together as a team. In addition, all of the students agreed that trying to find ways to generate funds for the group was not an easy thing to do. The ideas generated were not only creative but must also be feasible for them to be implemented. "Generating fund was not easy; we had to put a lot of effort. We discuss on many possibilities, we even debated over it but when we agreed we put all our efforts into it. Alhamdulillah, we did really well when we were able to collect...i should say a lot of money. We even managed to donate some to an orphanage home (smiling)" said one of the informants. It is highly evident that generating funds was not an easy task for the students who were trained to work in the public sector as teachers. In other words, when they graduate they would most probably join the civil service as government servants. Business and entrepreneurial activities were not among the courses

offered to them. However, these students demonstrated high and critical reflective ability when they were successful in generating money to finance their professional development seminar. In these instances, these students demonstrated what Jordi [14], described as the ability to reflect, where they were able to recapture their experience, think, mull and evaluate on what they had gone through. Jordi too explained that such cognitive reflection enabled one to extract knowledge from authentic and concrete experience.

Developing Linkage with Others/outside: Another way in which learning was seen as engaging by these informants was in developing linkages with others and outsiders. Planning the seminar and the entrepreneurship activities requires these students to communicate with those from outside the faculty and also the university. Such exposure allows them to make meaningful interpretations of the ups and downs in the real world. These meaningful interpretations are a series of outcomes on how students learned through experiential learning. Ilaris [13], captured and mentioned such experiences as teaching by involving the 'students' experiences from outside of the school' or in this case the university. In other words, when students interact with the outside world, they come into contact with the realities and construct meanings to their learning moments.

One of the student's views completely describes this aspect of learning engagement. He said, "I believe I have learned so much when we had to organize the seminars. As for myself, I had to find the guest speakers for the seminar. Me and another friend were assigned specifically for this. So much of work and time was spent to call, then to make appointment, then, we had to meet the potential speaker and negotiate on the amount to be paid as well as the topic and the duration of the talk. We had a speaker who declined at the last minute...how we had to search for a replacement from another organization. We were lucky because the new organization was an NGO (non-governmental organization), so they even offered to speak for free of charge. Though not an easy task."

A lecturer too reiterated the above when she explained that "There are two things that the students find to be most challenging- finding the funds and finding the speakers. Both of these functions required the students to engage and communicate with external organizations...I have also had the opportunity when three organizations representing three different speakers invited to the seminar inquired and later selected a few

of our students to work with them, i.e. two private business organizations and one NGO. That certainly reflected the linkages we have developed with others through learning.”

Clearly these moments distinguish the difference between learning via traditional lecture type classes and learning via doing hands-on practical activities. In relation to this, Grove-White [12], described the relative differences between what she termed as everyday knowledge and academic knowledge. According to her everyday knowledge is ‘located in our experience of the world’, while academic knowledge is ‘located in our experience of our experience of the world’

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study found that the entrepreneurial elements integrated into the course were well received by the students. Based on the findings, the students viewed learning in this course to be highly engaging and experiential. They too reported that they had indeed benefited from the experience of organising their fundraising activities and the PD seminar. Some of the skills the students felt they had learned were communication skills, team work skills, management skills and leadership skills. The value of engagement is undeniably high. Learning by various ways of ‘doing’ engages students by application and challenge. It encourages students to not only take responsibility for their own learning but also allows them to develop personally and professionally. In other words, these students viewed their learning experiences as a developmental process that exposed them to real life working realities. The lecturers also viewed this kind of experiential learning as being invaluable for the students, allowing them to learn crucial life lessons and entrepreneurial skills that can only come from engaging in actual and practical learning activities with embedded entrepreneurial tasks. Another issue of pertinence is the way this course is carried out. Teachers and lecturers are expected to be innovative and creative in carrying out their lectures. Instead of utilizing the traditional means, innovations in pedagogical methods and instructions are an expected element to enhance the learning process and outcome. Besides, change in the nature of assignments too will have an impact over the ways in which lecturers and teachers intend to teach. How learning then should be hands-on, practical, experiential, problem centered as well as inquiry based, makes the planning of a lesson as well as an entire course a challenge that needs to be catered for in the future.

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