

LEARNING ENVIRONMENT ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT: *The purpose of this research paper is to find out how a learning environment of higher educational institutes constitute a powerful learning environment. There exists a gap in the literature regarding powerful learning environment, hence, this paper aims to fill that gap. Some of the learning issues have been identified that exist in higher education system which are being affected by learning environments. Also, how higher education institutes are achieving its goals of social transformation have been discussed in detail. Furthermore, it aims to find out how organisations are involving learners in constructivist and collaborative ways to create a strong and powerful learning environment. This research paper proposes suggestions to improve the quality of the learning environment in higher educational institutes. There has also been a reflection on higher education scholarship of research and teaching.*

KEYWORDS: Learning, Environment Analysis, Higher Educational, Institute

INTRODUCTION

Teaching, learning and assessment are always supposed to be aligned and integrated in any educational institute. This depicts that careful consideration must be given to the learning outcomes at the successful completion of every course. This further explains that delivering right skills and knowledge must be well aligned with the suitable and carefully constructed methods of assessing the outcomes. The entire structure tends to fail if these three main components are out of alignment. Students are an integral part of this process in an institute. The aim of learning is to provide learners with tasks that are challenging, authentic and above all, meaningful. According to (Lines, n.d.), assessments are only authentic when they closely match the anticipated performance and simultaneously, it takes place in an authentic framework. The process of assessment is dynamic and impacts upon the learner being assessed. Research proved that easy questions given at the start of the examination paper leads to higher overall grades because success at the start helps in building confidence in learner's mind. The adoption of a large variety of assessment techniques is important for institutes to create a strong and powerful learning environment. Concurrently, examinations must be in a way to emphasize higher order skills and also enclosed in a learner's portfolio. The portfolio comprises of educator's personal observations, examination results, a reflective diary and so on. Lines (n.d.) stressed on the assessment package because it results in the engagement of the learner in developing desired capabilities and in the meantime, straightforward skills and knowledge is also not ignored.

Gerjets & Hesse (2004) mentioned that communication technologies nowadays and new information technologies play a vital role in implementing powerful learning environment. However, advanced learning technologies such as powerful interfaces or large computer networks are not essential in creating a powerful learning environment in any educational institute. Powerful learning environments can be created without using advanced technologies and at the same time, powerful learning technologies may be used in a way that does not lead to a powerful learning environment. Schoenfeld (1985) proved in his research work that

powerful learning environments are created by constructive, active, understanding based activities in a cooperative environment without heavily relying on technological devices. On the contrary, Gerjets & Hesse (2004) mentioned that usage of computational power for educational work are still committed to a traditional way of learning that tends to focus on the memorisation of provided knowledge elements.

LEARNING ISSUES

Technology in higher education

Higher education is clearly being reshaped by the process of globalisation along with the digital revolution. The rising costs and declining sources of income are two important factors placing a growing pressure on organisation. Higher educational institutes are facing long-lasting effects from the global financial crisis which has tremendously impacted the in-take number of learners along with the funding level. Learners have also increased their expectations and demands in the educational sector. Rankings of universities are influencing the position of institutes in the global market and employment is a mounting concern for students. Learners are more interested in looking for access to education and services with new technological skills involved and more flexible choices of delivery. Universities, hence, have to invest more in convenient and accessible infrastructure with expensive facilities in order to remain competitive and meet the required expectations of the learners. Pima (2012) suggested that portal, being the latest technology, acts as a central place where all types of information is easily accessible to learners.

Olelewe (2014) considers that information technology tends to offer a powerful learning tool in the field of education which demands understanding and development of new skills of the educator as well as learner and provide different ways of engaging learner at different levels of education. Some researchers speculate that role of technology in the higher education system will diminish in upcoming years but others argue that the large ongoing investment in this field of technology is essential or not and also, at the same time, is technology useful in delivering the promise with respect to better-quality learning? The importance of using more sophisticated software and technology-rich environment will keep on increasing with the passage of time as there are always new expectations from the learners and understanding of the world which is surrounding them.

Higher expectations of learners and the increased demand for accountability leads to the proliferation of reporting requirements from accreditation and governing bodies. The increased demand for accountability is implying a decreasing trust in the higher education system by the common public and also, the policymakers. Universities worldwide are now engaging in dialogue and debates to improve a set of learning outcomes to respond accordingly. This means that they are identifying the need for a much better system that move beyond counting materials such as books or computers in order to measure the learning outcomes. The new shift of focus on accountability is placing a higher demands on academic technology units such as e-portfolios, course management system. Olelewe (2014) mentioned that challenges with the technology is not just the high cost, but also the cost involved in training user, low priority given by learners to the technology at times, cost of licenses and applications are involved. Using digital technologies in the universities will help in pushing the boundaries of education. Learners in this era are highly tech-savvy. Universities can now introduce mobile app to

prepare learners, in this contemporary society, for a successful life. Giving them digital access not only to e-books but also to journals from their own online library app, news from anywhere on the campus and beyond would positively impact the performance of a learner.

Research

Universities worldwide seem to be functioning well but the expectations and challenges have changed dramatically in nature in the recent years. Henard & Leprince-Ringuet (2008) elucidated that the quality culture of an organisation is depicted in the form of answering challenges, rather it must be used as a concept that helps in identifying challenges. Research on learning is not a recipe for designing powerful learning environment. Today, in the current era, learners are more interested in understanding the current state of the information and to improve it, build on it and can make decisions in the uncertain circumstances. Therefore, learning environment in any educational institute tends to directly impact learner outcomes. Factors related to classroom environment have an influence on learner results. According to (Ozay, Kaya & Sexek, 2004), research showed that the classroom environment is one of the strong determinants when it comes to student learning. Learners tend to learn better when they perceive their classroom in a positive manner. Higher emphasis on research by my institute is overshadowing teaching as well as learning for learners.

Academics place a high value when it comes to research and are also aware of the challenges related to publishing articles in valuable journals. On the contrary, time spent on teaching by educators in the educational institute undermine their capacity to compete with their competitors effectively in the research field. However, this plays an important role in determining a successful pathway for educators. Faculty, in higher educational institutes, is focusing on relevance of their programmes to economic as well as societal needs and are willing to re-consider their role that may help in strengthening the learning of learners and their future employability. Many are also exploring alternative pedagogical practices to help meet the desired requirements in learning for learners.

Nowadays, educational institutes face the challenge of increased diversity of learners that varies from young people enrolling in higher education along with the mature learners at the same time. Also, institutes come under the greater pressure by public to demonstrate that they are preparing their graduate for the market as well. Organisation plays an active role in showing what value learners will get in return for their cost of education. For instance, they hold seminars, invite old graduates who are working in prominent places in the market, open nights etc to inform parents and learners about the value of education from a high ranked university in the job market. Moreover, universities are now partnering with other entities because of the high cost of research infrastructure, to bring together research teams of equal potential. Networking is now important to be successful on the global stage because research and networking seems to be the most effective way to function at the optimum level.

Constructivism & Collaboration

Lines (n.d.) explained that constructivism is the notion that learner must be able to interpret data presented to them by educators. Learners must be able to construct his own meaning of the information he is exposed to. Furthermore, learners have to actively participate in this process of learning. In universities nowadays, educators are always challenging the learners in different teaching methods to ensure that evaluation of learner is carried out comprehensively. Also, they provide suitable challenging real-life examples and situations to stimulate learning.

This environment recognises that for deep learning, learners must take ownership of all the inputs and make sense of the situation and context. Such learning environments are not removing the role of educators but in fact, it is the modifying the role as a mentor. Also, in the modern era, learning environment in the institutes are moving the conventional configuration of teacher-directed to student-orientation configuration. This explains the notion that some of the responsibility in terms of learning is now being moved from educators to learners. However, educators do guide learners to achieve the standards and choose suitable learning strategies that may work for them. Moreover, educators are making classrooms more interactive through e-learning, healthy discussions on taught topics, case studies to provide more exposure on different subjects and easy access to provided knowledge to help learners in learning.

Quality Education

Henard & Leprince-Ringuet (2008) mentioned that a new generation of educators are replacing the baby boomers when retire. These educators have grown up while using basic technologies, if not the most advanced one, which helps in renewing their vision of great teaching. A possible change and a solution is that faculty is coming up with more integrated professional identity via reconceptualization of the connection between learning, teaching and most important prevailing concern i.e. research. International competition has increased the demand for quality teaching and quality assurance. Henard & Leprince-Ringuet (2008) further explained that the international rankings which are solely based on quality of teaching are reinforcing the attractiveness of initiatives related to quality. Students are also benefitting from opportunities such as international scholarships which gives them a chance to compare the quality of teaching provided by different institutions at different levels. However, standards like these trigger questions such as should PHD be considered as a way to judge teaching competence?

The work of (Slabbert & Gouws, 2006) proves that courses being offered to learners nowadays do not prepare learners enough to acquire the professional competencies which are important to succeed in professional life. Education practices in higher education institutes are not serving the learner adequately to meet the challenging demands of the profession they step into in their later lives, accordingly. Herrington (2006) added that universities are opening their doors to commercialization because of cut-down of budgets by governments, increased work load of faculty members and increased tuition fees. Higher educational institutes need corrective measures in order to cope with the global academic environment. Initiatives which involve learner's participation such as collaborative arrangement at cross-border level, branch campuses in different countries must be put in place to facilitate internationalization.

Organisations must also put efforts into monitoring such as initiatives to ensure that the quality standards of international higher education environment are being met. Also, a distinction must be clearly made between the organisational action and the consequences of education. Simultaneously, organisation must focus on enhancing the critical thinking skills of not only the learners but also of faculty and leadership. Innovative and sophisticated learning approaches would also improve the quality in the fast-changing education sector. Organisation's ability to differentiate itself from the competitors; by attracting as well as retaining faculty of international distinction, recruiting a diverse group of learner, securing partnerships with other entities, providing philanthropic support are some of the key factors that would help many organisations to survive the challenges in this competitive market. Offering a compelling educational proposition is a strong way to attract learners in the increasingly competitive sector.

Higher Education Scholarship

Boyer (1990) asserts that scholarship of research is different from scholarship of teaching. On the contrary, other researchers such as Bemowski (1991) believes that teaching must not be isolated from the research. Henard & Leprince-Ringuet (2008) suggested that we must now move beyond the idea of teaching and research debate and focus on the notion of scholarship of teaching. Communication is one of the most important pillars of the teaching scholarship. McCarthy (2008) posited that research is viewed as disciplinary research cultures where researchers, academics, and postgraduate research students are working towards generating and extracting new information. On the contrary, teaching has been seen as taking place in a departmental learning environment.

The teaching scholarship demands that educators must change their negative perception of problems in teaching. Educators, when confronted with problems, try to avoid or ignore such situation. However, they must try to convert problems into opportunities to expand their horizon of knowledge on learning and teaching. Henard & Leprince-Ringuet (2008) explained that changing the nature of the problem to an ongoing investigation is what scholarship of teaching depicts overall. The profession of teaching must advance and also, progress in teaching must be sustainable. Peterson (2009) suggested that universities must need to engage learners with the critical problems of present time to produce socially responsible learners. This implies that significant shifts are essential within the pedagogy and research of higher education system. Peterson (2009) further recommended that universities should now move towards community-based experiential learning which would help in enhancing the learner's learning along with the civic engagement and also it would alter the epistemological methodologies used by university.

Engaged scholarship tends to expand the cultural, social and human capital in universities and also improve our attempts to understand and address the social problems. Successful community-based educational courses usually involve a classroom that academically grounds experiential learning of learners, a curriculum that helps them in analyzing the complexities existing in services sector and most importantly, on-going building of relationships, strong communications and assessment of the goals and values of community and campus. Universities and organisations must also step forward in community partnerships as it is highly successful in learner's learning outcomes when learners spend significant amount of time with community partner organisation, actively participating in activities, contributing in research and projects, reflecting on the connection between theory and practice, and above all, contributing significantly to the long term goals of social change.

McCarthy (2008) explained higher education does not only require specialization but it also requires integration. This infers that scholars also need to give meaning to facts and observation in order to put them into perspective and making connections between other disciplines. This intergration of scholarship in higher education has more to with the goals and purpose of higher education in general. Another interesting element discussed by McCarthy (2008) in her work is the scholarship of application which talks about the engagement. The scholarship of application explains that knowledge can always solve problems and serve the community. It further implies that the application of expertise of scholars must be used to solve the consequential problems in the higher education system.

CONCLUSION

The limitation in some of the literature work mentioned above is that it is difficult to generalize the research work because it is conducted on a small scale. The changes in course designing can lead to improvement in learner's learning and development. Goal-setting and teamwork are some of the useful methods that help educators in attaining excellence in teaching. Training of faculty members can also improve the quality of learning which in turn creates a powerful learning environment. International mobility, international rankings, and comparison at a global scale are the key themes in most of the countries. Also, increase in social diversity in most of the developed economies has significantly transformed the learners at the higher level. Organisation must always be prepared to deal with changes in order to be successful in the global environment. Quality of teaching would continue to change because of the globalisation. Landscape of globalized higher education will further demand for a strengthened considerations in terms of quality assurance. Diversity of learners is encouraging educators to question their traditional practices of teaching. There must always be an alignment between management and policy makers, strategic initiatives related to faculty members, teaching and learning practices to ensure quality improvement.

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