

Need for a Paradigm Shift in The Teaching – Learning Relationships in Modern Institutions of Higher Education

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ABSTRACT - Knowledge has become the most important resource of the modern world. The information explosion in the 21st Century has necessitated the review and refinement of methods of learning. Recent researches in this field, most importantly that of Robert Barr and John Tagg in 1995 have introduced some revolutionary concepts which call for a paradigm shift in the mechanics of learning in higher education. The Learning Paradigm thus introduced by them focuses on learning outcomes as against the instructional orientation of the prevailing practices. It is a student centric approach which puts students in charge of their learning rather than being subjugated to passive recipients of lectures from teachers. The new paradigm considers learning as a result of a collaborative effort between students and teachers and allows for new dimensions to be added to student-teacher relationships. The faculty acquires the role of enriching students learning experiences by engaging them in challenging ways and supporting them in their construction of knowledge. Information technology has also made an immense contribution to the emerging order of students' exposure to information and instructions. Since the new paradigm shifts focus of education to learning outcomes, institutions of higher education shall have to fundamentally re-align their mission, structure, processes and culture to adapt to these new revolutionary ideas on learning and higher education.

Key Words: Higher Education; collaborative learning, student engagement, learning paradigm, knowledge, student-teacher relationship, learning community, learning outcomes.

I. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary higher education has become a subject matter of interest and action world over. Knowledge has been recognised as the most powerful resource of the 21st Century and is expected to be so for all times to come. Modern societies are tending towards knowledge societies and there is an ever growing concern about putting more efficient and effective educational tools and practices into place to grapple with the exponentially expanding universe of knowledge. Some revolutionary concepts have been introduced in the recent past by Robert Barr and John Tagg through their articles in December 1995 issue of *Change*, "From Teaching to Learning: A New Paradigm For Undergraduate Education", which essentially postulated a paradigm shift in the manner learning should happen in a institution of higher education in the modern times. The old paradigm of teacher induced learning needed replacement with a new one wherein students are in control of their learning.

In India, like in most of the other countries, poor performance of students in higher education has ushered a spate of educational reforms which have been centered on the quality standards, particularly relating to the quality of teaching. Further, the growing number of institutions and the spiraling cost of higher education have given rise to the demand for institutional accountability regarding the quality of education provided. With the introduction of the new revelations as mentioned above and the desire to

embrace the new learning paradigm, many educational institutions have been re-examining their core mission, their central values, their actions, decisions and allocations related to their academic activities. The new thinking is revolutionary as it has fundamentally altered the perspectives of teaching and learning in an institutional space and has become a matter of keen academic interest and debate world over. It has produced new dimensions for the traditionally recognised roles of teachers and the nature of their relationships with their students.

II. THE TEACHING AND THE LEARNING PARADIGMS

The Teaching Paradigm which is the prevalent paradigm in colleges and universities today focuses on learning as an outcome of delivering of lectures by the teachers to the students. The teacher is the central figure, the source of knowledge, and he usually employed methods such as lectures, assigned readings, problem sets, field work etc. (instructions) for transferring knowledge. Learning is the primary responsibility of the student while the institution's responsibility is barely to establish curricular standards and for providing infrastructure, support services and resources. Thus transfer of knowledge happens in the context of an impersonal relationship between the student and the teacher. This implied that students or teachers were replaceable without affecting the transfer of knowledge. In terms of organizational arrangement, independent and discipline-centered departments are the repositories of

specialized yet isolated knowledge. They were manned by teachers who enjoyed the class distinction of being the most important operatives of the institution and a large chunk of resources were dedicated to their upkeep and updation through training and refresher programs. The above contentions are now being challenged by the revelations of the learning paradigm about how students learn. Even empirical evidence from a number of disciplines suggests that lectures to passive students contribute very little to real learning. Rather, techniques such as student engagement, collaborative learning have shown great enhancement in student learning and success.

A number of researches at the turn of the century suggested that the educational context created by faculty behaviours and attitudes had a dramatic effect on student learning and engagement. Institutions where faculty engaged students within and outside of the class rooms, and placed emphasis on enriching students educational experiences were able to achieve active participation of students in the process of learning. Rhoads (2001) articulated that 'the best universities and colleges of future will be those that demonstrate the most effective gains in learning from their students.

The Learning Paradigm forwarded by Barr and Tagg in 1995 postulated that faculty creates learning environments enabling students to develop knowledge through self-learning. The thought underlying the learning paradigm involves (i) that the mission of the college or university be student learning rather than teaching. (ii) that institutions should accept the responsibility for student learning (iii) that student learning and support should be the common purpose of all persons and processes and should guide the institution's decisions and resource allocation (iv) that institution's effectiveness should be evaluated on the student learning outcomes rather than its endowments.

The characteristic features of the learning paradigm are that (i) Learning is something a learner does, and not something that is done to the learner. This means that students do not passively accept knowledge but engage in learning by themselves. (ii) Teacher's efforts are towards developing competencies in students and enabling them to learn by building positive and supportive relationship with them. (iii) Challenges in learning must be balanced by social support within the learning situation where learning is achieved through cooperative efforts.

The superiority of the Learning Paradigm is explained by the concepts of *Student Engagement* and *Collaborative Learning*. Student engagement has emerged as an important concept in education. The student engagement theory originated in the 1990s as a result of the work of Austin (1984,85), Pace (1984) and Kuh and his colleagues. It is based on the simple but powerful premise that students learn from what they do in colleges. In other words student learning is positively related to student engagement on

campus, and that institutional policies and practices influence the level of student engagement on campus. In simple terms, student engagement may be understood as the quality of effort students themselves devote towards the desired learning outcome. It is used by institutions in deploying educationally effective practices. Countries such as The United States of America, Canada, Australia and New Zeland have adopted measuring tools for student engagement that focus on student behaviour and their relationships within the institution. For instance, The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) was developed and introduced in the USA and Canada in the year 2000 as an instrument for gathering annual information about student participation in programmes and activities provided by institutions for their learning and personal development. It is an important proxy for overall quality of education. Student engagement is evaluated in terms of some salient factors, namely (i) Level of Academic challenge : the extent to which expectations and assessments challenge students to learn. (ii) Active and Collaborative Learning: Student's efforts to actively construct their knowledge through questions and discussions etc. (iii) Supportive Campus Environment: Feeling of belongingness within the community engaged in learning and (iv) Student – Faculty Interaction: The level and nature of students contact with the teaching staff.

Collaborative learning is the flip side of individualistic learning. In collaborative learning people learn in groups by combined efforts. Such learning groups are known as learning communities. In general terms, a community is a group of people who share common culture and goals. Communities are bound by interpersonal relationships between its members. In learning communities students are thought of as citizens while teachers are considered as community leaders. Their interpersonal relationships create accountability and caring towards each other. The traditional learning process is premised on competitive and individualistic learning situations where communication is minimal, assistance is viewed as cheating and there is a feeling of distrust among class fellows and the faculty. On the other hand in the learning paradigm students and teachers are viewed as collaborators rather than barriers to a student's personal achievements. Learning therefore becomes a team effort where individuals work toward maximizing each others' achievements. As a result, the passivity of a lecturing mode gets transformed to active engagement of students who are cognitively, physically, emotionally and psychologically involved in constructing their own knowledge.

It is important to mention at this juncture that there has also been extensive debate on the pitfalls of informal relationships between students which may turn into emotional bonding, as is reported in numerous cases of affairs between teachers and their students. Teachers now interact with their students in a variety of contexts, many of

them being informal and some being purely social. Such occasions blur the line between being friendly toward the student and being a friend. Another related issue is that many faculty members who freshly enter teaching profession are quite young and therefore relate with students on a more equal plane. In such instances it is important to impose limits of professional conduct around such interactions. This may be possible by way of observing continence in communicating, dressing, interacting on social media or social occasions etc. so that the students do not start taking the teacher for granted. In India there have also been instances of campus violence targeted against teachers which compel us to review student-teacher relationships. There could be various reasons attributed to such phenomenon which include recruitment of young and inexperienced teachers who are not able to handle complicated situations, pressure of performance on both students and teachers, and sometimes even the woeful absence of good parenting. At times students bring to the campus a negative mindset and a poor set of values from their homes. Parents, who are the first role models of students, fail to instill necessary values in their children which are the cause of trouble later. Academicians feel that introduction of value based education could be one of the solutions of the problem.

Putting learning at the heart of the academic effort would require overhauling the conceptual, procedural, curricular and structural form of the institutions. Under the Learning Paradigm, student learning is the shared responsibility of – teachers, librarians, counselors, administrative staff and the management. Every employee must have a stake in the students' success. Thus, compartmentalizing people to traditional roles in the institution would keep them from associating with the mission of the institution and thus prevent them from identifying learning problems or making contributions outside the ambits of their traditional roles. Similarly management planning and decisions must be made with consideration to their potential impact on student learning. The faculty shall have to acquire the role of leading the way in identifying learning outcomes for students and then developing and refining methods to make such outcomes a reality.

III. STUDENTS AS CUSTOMERS

As per the opinion of some educationists, it would not be wrong to place students in the position of customers while trying to forge a working relationship with them. The analogy of students as customers has an institutional perspective since students are customers to the institutions. Universities and colleges compete with each other for getting enrollments for which they dedicate considerable resources and have elaborate marketing programs to attract students. They have also gone at lengths to expand student services and developed convenient course schedules to retain more students. Bureaucratic processes are being

replaced with personalized attention and technology is being used to offer online instructions through use of internet or VSAT. Thus from the institution's perspective the student is purchasing educational services from competing institutions based on certain preferences. Thus concern for making educational services more attractive and value added propositions gives the student the status of a customer. It would be wrong to think that this dilutes the position of the faculty against that of the student as faculty continues in the role of the facilitator in all cases.

IV. RATING OF INSTITUTIONS

Educational reforms have brought the concept of performance oriented funding of institutions where institutions have to be rated for the quality of education provided. Earlier, the ratings were based on evaluation of resources and processes rather than outcomes. Institutions with glamorous or exclusive infrastructure usually ranked on the top. However, under the learning paradigm they would be judged on the basis of student learning outcomes and therefore continuous improvements in this direction would be their goal.

V. NEW ROLE FOR TEACHERS

The shift in control of learning to students in the new paradigm would not jeopardize the status of teachers as they would hold the most important position as facilitators in the learning process. Teachers will acquire the role of designers of the learning environment who would continuously guide, mentor and evaluate the learning of students. They would not only have to keep themselves updated in their disciplines but also keep in step with the new research and information and also the new techniques and methods of transferring the same. They will have to be engaged in designing and continuously improving learner-centered environments. Students of today have been fast in adapting to the new ways of learning. The 'Net Gen Students' as they have been termed, prefer learning in small informal setups rather than big lecture halls. They engage in extensive exchange of information through emails, text messages to sort out their problems and prefer collaborative methods of learning. Universities and colleges are accordingly featuring smaller and informal gathering and interaction places such as cafeteria, garden benches, shades for group study etc. and providing facilities such as wifi and recreation centers on their campuses to attract students around the clock. Information technology has added a new dimension in the move towards modern learning practices. It has brought learning to the door steps of the learners which has done away with the discomfort of going to a "place" for learning at appointed times. Soon enough the Class room may lose its primacy as a place for acquiring knowledge. The above developments should give institutions a cue about how they should plan their future pedagogical approaches.

VI. CONCLUSION

Putting learning at the heart of the academic enterprise will require an overhaul of the conceptual, procedural, curricular, organizational and cultural make up. Institutions will have to be encouraged to reconfigure the ways in which they interact with students. Faculty has a crucial role to play in the college experience of the students therefore colleges and universities will have to assign new roles and responsibilities and re-orient them to the new paradigm of learning and student-teacher relationships. Most institutions may be still prisoners of the old system and traditions that would stand in the way of a paradigm change. However, with the publication of new concepts of Barr and Tagg, there has been a measurable movement towards the learning paradigm in higher education in terms of research, experimentation and application. The profound interest and seriousness of educators in the new avatar of learning leaves little doubt as to the future design of higher education.

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