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Building Empowered Students: The Perennial Challenge for University Teachers

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ABSTRACT

This paper contends that if higher education is to be relevant, then the curriculum must incorporate generic, transferable lifeskills (also referred to as 'generic graduate attributes') in addition to the regular subject content of their specific discipline or programme.

There is a general consensus among educationists and business people alike that much of what students learn today won't be true five years from now. However, if they are taught how to take responsibility for their own ideas, how to think and communicate a problem through and how to have a positive can-do attitude, then no matter what subject matter is used to get these generic, transferable life skills across, they are being given something they can use throughout their lives. This is one of the biggest challenges facing university teachers across the globe today - teachers of tomorrow's leaders.

By making use of Hopson and Scally's work on Lifeskills Teaching and William Purkey's ideas on Invitational Learning, the paper will outline ways in which this could be achieved.

INTRODUCTION

Purkey (1996) noted a decade ago that 'there is a growing awareness that education is not about "normal" distributions, standardized test scores, labelling and grouping of students, relentless and ruthless competition, and certainly not about "being number one." The revolution is underway because growing numbers of people realize that education is about inviting every single person who enters a school to realize his or her relatively boundless potential in all areas of worthwhile human endeavor. It is concerned with more than grades, attendance, and academic achievement. It is concerned with the process of becoming a decent and productive human being.'

Earning a university education is much more than simply acquiring discipline and subject skills and collecting a piece of paper to prove as much; it is about developing empowered individuals who have the generic graduate attributes being called for by increasingly vociferous employers, who more and more expect their new employees straight from university to be 'plug and play'.

GENERIC GRADUATE ATTRIBUTES: WHAT ARE THEY?

For the purpose of this paper, the definition of Bowden et al (2000) has been used. They define generic graduate attributes as 'the qualities, skills and understandings a university community agrees its students should develop during their time at the institution. These attributes go beyond disciplinary expertise or technical knowledge.'

Harvey and Knight (1996) identified six broad areas of graduate attributes which employers identified as important:

- knowledge and understanding core principles
- a positive attitude and a willingness to learn

- intellectual and lateral thinking abilities
- ability to work in teams
- ability to make a contribution to the organisation quickly (i.e. being 'plug and play')
- interpersonal skills
- communication skills.

EMPOWERMENT: WHAT IS IT?

Chamberlin (1997) pointed out almost a decade ago that 'empowerment is a popular term in mental health programmes, yet there has been a lack of a clear definition of the term.' She directed a research project which sought to create some clarity to the term. The result of this research was the conclusion that empowerment was a complex, multidimensional concept that can best be described as a process. As such Chamberlin offered a definition of empowerment as having a number of qualities, beliefs and skills. According to her, an empowered individual:

- Has access to information and resources
- Has the power to make decisions
- Has a range of options from which to make choices
- Is assertive
- Has the belief that he / she can make a difference
- Has learnt to think critically
- Feels part of the group / team
- Understands that all people have rights
- Has learning skills
- Understands that growth and change are self-initiated and never-ending.

Interestingly, more than a decade before, Hopson and Scally (1986) defined empowerment as the continual process of becoming; of taking increasingly greater charge of oneself and one's life. To them, an empowered person is open to change, assertive, proactive, self-accountable, self-directed, realistic, likes himself / herself, values and affirms others, sees alternatives in any given situation and develops commitments. On the other hand, a disempowered person is closed to change, non-assertive or aggressive, reactive, blames others, is other-directed, unrealistic, has a deep-seated dislike of himself / herself, negates others, cannot see alternatives in any given situation (in other words, has tunnel vision) and is unable to develop commitments (Hopson and Scally, 1986).

A decade before Hopson and Scally, Phares (1976) stated that the more empowered individuals are, the more committed they are to social action than their less empowered counterparts; the more people feel they have power to influence what happens to them, the more they will use that power for the benefit of others and their community. In essence what Phares found three decades ago was that the more people take charge of their own lives, the less selfish they are likely to be. People who are low in confidence, anxious and feel powerless are likely to be too involved with their own problems to have time to help others with their problems or to emerge as strong, effective leaders.

THE CHALLENGE FOR UNIVERSITY TEACHERS

University teachers who are serious about building empowered individuals will ensure that their classroom activities and curriculae include, in addition to the expected acquisition of knowledge in their specific subject, lifeskills training and the identification of values, commitments and beliefs related to the qualities both Chamberlin (1997) and Hopson & Scally (1986) identified in their individual research as part of their operational definition of empowered individuals.

Values, attitudes and beliefs

Empowered behaviour demonstrates the following values: sensitivity to the needs of others; the belief that each person is unique, valuable and worthy of respect; the belief that people possess untapped potential.

The empowered individual also embraces the belief that people are responsible for their feelings, whether good or bad; that any new situation, however undesired, contains within it some opportunity for personal growth; that stress and anxiety can be managed; that failures are learning experiences; that all behaviours have payoffs, healthy or unhealthy; that one will not be able to respect, value and love others until you have first learned to respect, value and love yourself.; that there is always an alternative and one can choose.

Commitments

These are goals which are embraced and arrived at freely within the context of one's personal value system, after an examination of the alternatives.

Lifeskills

Teachers who are focussed on developing empowered individuals will ensure that their classroom strategies and processes include opportunities for enhancing communication skills, teamwork, problem-solving and decision-making strategies. They will also encourage assertive behaviours and critical thinking.

Empowerment begins with the individual and spreads to others. There can be little doubt that empowered behaviour is more effectively developed within a university classroom that is deliberately structured to encourage, reinforce and teach the qualities, beliefs and skills that foster empowerment of the individual.

The basic premise of this paper is that whichever way one chooses to define empowerment and transferable graduate lifeskills, the development of these attributes in students can only occur in an intentionally inviting educational environment in which the teacher is firstly a discipline expert, but also intentionally inviting in his / her approach to the way the discipline content is transmitted to students.

AN INTRODUCTION TO INVITATIONAL THEORY

Invitational Theory is quite 'young' as theories go, with origins in the work of William W. Purkey dating from 1984. Invitational Theory has been applied mostly in the two areas of counselling and education. In terms of its roots, it has its origins in two prior theory domains, Self-Concept Theory and The Perceptual Tradition.

Invitational Theory is a theory of practice for communicating caring and appropriate messages intended to promote the realisation of human potential. In an education context, it asserts that every person and everything in and around educational institutions adds to or takes away from the process of being a beneficial presence in the lives of students.

Invitational Education is based on the following assumptions: trust, which includes empathic understanding and genuineness, respect and the accompanying belief in cooperation, optimism and intentionality. Together these assumptions offer university educators a consistent stance through which they can create and maintain an environment which encourages the optimal development of empowered individuals. To further elaborate, inviting educators espouse trust in that they see all students as able, valuable, responsible and should be treated accordingly. In their classroom practices they model respect in that they view the education process as a co-operative, collaborative activity where process is as important as product. They are optimistic in as much as they see all students as having untapped potential in all fields of worthwhile human endeavour. And finally they model intentionality by embracing the belief that this untapped potential in students can best be realised by places, policies, processes and programmes specifically designed to invite development, and by people who are intentionally inviting with themselves and others, personally and professionally.

The purpose of Invitational Education is to create total learning environments and climates where people want to be and where they want to learn. It focuses on all the forces that contribute to

human achievement in an organisation, including the places, policies, programmes, processes and the people who create these forces (also referred to as 'the 5 Ps').

Whenever one of these five Ps evokes positive feelings in a person, that person is said to be 'invited'. On the other hand, whenever one of these five Ps evokes negative feelings in a person, that person is said to be 'disinvited'. Everything in an educational institution either works to add to or to take away from being a beneficial presence in the lives of people.

Within this theory, four levels of personal and professional functioning are identified and used to evaluate the application of Invitational Theory in the learning process. These are:

- intentionally disinviting: negative, with potentially lethal intent
- unintentionally disinviting: negative, lacking care or appropriateness or both
- unintentionally inviting: positive, but lacking purpose, direction or consistency
- intentionally inviting: positive, with deliberate purpose, direction or consistency.

As a holistic theoretical approach to adult education, the contention of Invitational Theory is that the total environment and climate contribute to, or detract from, personal and professional functioning. As Purkey and Stanley (1990) point out, 'Everything is connected with everything else positively or negatively, so everything counts'.

CREATING THE INTENTIONALLY INVITING CLASSROOM

In an intentionally inviting classroom, students are encouraged to take ownership of their learning. The intentionally inviting university teacher will constantly be searching for ways to make his / her classroom learner-centred. This may start with providing students with the exercises necessary to think about and identify their own particular learning styles, which is part of the self-knowledge essential to an empowered individual. They then provide students with the necessary opportunities for utilising their own learning styles in the course of acquiring the subject knowledge.

Intentionally inviting teachers will also make use of a wide variety of teaching and learning methods and strategies which will encourage independent critical thinking, problem-solving abilities, working collaboratively and co-operatively in teams and communicating effectively in the process of acquiring the subject and discipline knowledge.

Moreover, the possibility of the democratic values, attitudes and beliefs modelled by the intentionally inviting educator being 'caught' by students is much stronger than in a classroom which seeks to teach these qualities.

SO HOW CAN THIS BE ACHIEVED IN THE UNIVERSITY LECTURE THEATRE?

As has already been mentioned, in the invitational lecture theatre, which by definition will be learner-centred, the following learning and teaching strategies will be amongst those intentionally invited methods used.

Team / Group Work

Group work is a strategy that promotes participation and interaction. It also fosters a deeper and more active learning process. In addition to exposing students to different approaches and ways of thinking, working with other students in groups can lead to more student participation and involvement with issues, ideas, and skills. It also means shifting the balance of class management more toward students, and trusting them to be able to teach each other and learn from each other.

Problem-based Learning (PBL)

This is an instructional method that challenges students to "learn to learn." Students are required to work co-operatively in groups to seek solutions to real world problems. These problems are used to engage students' curiosity and initiate learning the subject matter. PBL prepares students to think critically and analytically, and to find and use appropriate learning resources.

Case Study Projects

These are written summaries or syntheses of real-life cases which are based upon data and research. Students are required to isolate and think through the key issues involved against both theory and the larger comparative environment. They then identify appropriate strategies for the resolution of the 'case', weigh the pros and cons of the remedial options/strategies and recommend and present a rationale for the best resolution.

Simulations

These are the products that result when one creates the appearance or effect of something else. Games are contests in which both players and opponents operate under rules to gain a specified objective. Participants are provided with a simulated environment in which to play. These games are intended to provide students with insight into the process or event from the real world which is being simulated.

CONCLUSION

Within the inviting university classroom students will be given greater opportunities for becoming empowered since intentionally inviting teachers by definition model growth-oriented values, attitudes and beliefs. Moreover, while they are primarily in the process of facilitating the acquisition of specific subject knowledge, capabilities and skills, they also promote the development of goals and commitments in their students.

So what can the individual university teacher do to make his / her classroom an empowering place to be? A good place to start would be to examine one's own practices with a view to identifying any disinviting (and disempowering) practices and strategies, and to remember Professor Jacob Neusner's words:

'Much that you learn today won't be true five years from now; many things you haven't heard of today will be important five or ten years ahead. If I teach you something supposedly "relevant", I'm guaranteeing irrelevance. If I teach you how to work, to have good attitudes, to take responsibility for your own ideas, to communicate and to think a problem through, no matter what subject matter I use in order to get those basic skills across, then I'm giving you something you can use for a very long time. Those skills will never change. The stakes are a lifetime.'

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