

DIMENSIONS OF TEACHING: A CROSS-CULTURAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT: *This paper serves as a study of cross-cultural comparison of teaching. Responses from Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) senior faculty members' perceptions about teaching were analyzed and compared to responses in studies conducted by Dunkin and Precians (1992), and Clawson (1994). Dunkin and Precians studied twelve award-winning teachers' ideas at the University of Sydney. Clawson, on the other hand, interviewed 26 tenured professors at the eight public four-year institutions of West Virginia. The study revolves around four dimensions of teaching: teaching as structuring learning, teaching as motivating learning, teaching as encouraging activity and independence in learning, and teaching as establishing interpersonal relations conducive to learning.*

ABSTRAK: *Kajian ini merupakan satu kajian perbandingan silang budaya pengajaran. Maklumbalas daripada pensyarah-pensyarah kanan Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) yang terpilih telah dianalisa dan dibandingkan dengan maklumbalas daripada kajian-kajian yang dijalankan oleh Dunkin dan Precians (1992), dan Clawson (1994). Dunkin dan Precians telah mengkaji maklumbalas daripada 12 orang guru yang menerima anugerah cemerlang di University of Sydney. Manakala Clawson pula mengkaji maklumbalas daripada 26 profesor di Institut-Institut Awam di West Virginia. Tumpuan kajian ialah ke atas empat dimensi pengajaran iaitu: pengajaran bagi tujuan pembelajaran berstruktur; pengajaran bagi tujuan pembelajaran bermotivasi; pengajaran bagi tujuan aktiviti rancangan dan pembelajaran sendiri; dan pengajaran bagi tujuan mengasaskan hubungan "interpersonal" yang bersesuaian untuk pembelajaran.*

INTRODUCTION

The Malaysian education philosophy and the missions of the universities in Malaysia place emphasis on high quality teaching. In line with the education philosophy and the missions of the Malaysian universities, a first step is to better understand the perceptions of the university faculty members about teaching, their experiences in teaching, and the gaps and/or deficiencies they perceive as lacking in their classroom teaching. Investigating these factors can be a first effort to improve teaching among the Malaysian university faculty members. In addition, teaching is an interactive, dynamic process in which both the teachers and the students are discovering and constructing knowledge as they proceed (Riordan, 1994). Thus, there is a need to investigate the process of teaching as perceived by the university faculty members.

This study was an investigation of one Malaysian university faculty members' perceptions about teaching. Generally, it aimed to seek this research question: How do Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) faculty members view teaching? It was intended that this study served as a foundation for the design of faculty development programs for UUM faculty members. The nature of the study was qualitative. There were two in-depth interviews conducted in the study. The first was open-ended interview, and the second was semi-structured. The data collected from this study was systematically reviewed through a process of content analysis, which involved the process of sorting and categorizing the transcripts and the field notes.

THE FOCUS OF THE STUDY

In general, the purpose of the study was to describe UUM faculty members' perceptions about teaching. Among the questions asked to the respondents were:

1. What meanings do you attach to the term, "teaching"?
2. Describe your general attitudes and beliefs about teaching in the university.

Specifically, it attempted to compare the responses from UUM senior faculty members to those in studies done by Dunkin and Precians (1992) and Clawson (1994).

Thus, this paper also serves as a study of cross-cultural comparison of teaching.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

DUNKIN AND PRECIANS (1992)

In 1992, Dunkin and Precians studied twelve award-winning teachers' ideas about teaching at the University of Sydney. The average age of the participants at the time of the nomination was 49 years and their average number of years of teaching experience was 23 years. They received their awards for teaching but they had an average of 47 publications. The focus of the study was on the dimension of teaching and the dimension of individuals' thoughts and experiences regarding the evaluation of teaching. Dunkin and Precians interviewed the participants using a standard set of questions. They categorized the dimensions of teaching into four:

1. teaching as structuring learning
2. teaching as motivating learning
3. teaching as encouraging activity and independence in learning
4. teaching as establishing interpersonal relations conducive to learning.

They found that the award-winning faculty members often mentioned "the structuring learning dimension" first. This dimension was found to have great significance for eleven of the twelve participants. Teaching as structuring learning includes ways in which teachers could enhance students' learning. Some examples given by Dunkin are "Try to explain simple things clearly, not too much too quick, especially in the early years. Give them a structure they can hang their ideas on. They need four years of really routine learning to get to a point where they can really have useful discussions" (p. 58). Another example is "by making the course available, by preparing and giving a course outline and reading lists, putting books on reserve and especially by being available when students want you, not at a few restricted times" (p. 58).

CLAWSON (1994)

A study similar to Dunkin and Precians' was later conducted by Clawson in 1994. Her study focused on how tenured professors viewed teaching and how they revealed what beliefs and attitudes they hold to be true. Her participants were 26 professors at the eight public four-year institutions of West Virginia whose academic disciplines were social sciences and history, English and literature, math and sciences, and psychology. Twenty three of them were males and 3 were females. The average age was 53 years with the average years of teaching experience was 27. Using the same methodology (interview questions) as that of Dunkin and Precians' study, Clawson found that "the professors used one or more dimensions of teaching when they are teaching along with a variety of approaches" (p. 150). Similar to Dunkin and Precians' study, the teaching dimensions were structuring learning, motivating learning, encouraging activity, and social relationships. Multiple roles and approaches to teaching in college were named by the tenured faculty members. The two most common approaches are "a provider of information" and "helping the student discover for one's self"(p.103).

METHODOLOGY

Two similar questions from Dunkin and Precians' and Clawson's studies were used in the interview of this study.

They were:

1. Can you describe your general attitudes and beliefs about teaching in the university.
2. Could you tell me what a good day of teaching is like for you? How do you know when you have had a good class?

Fishbein's (1967) definition of attitude was used in this study: "the learned predispositions to respond to an object or class of objects in a favorable or unfavorable way" (p.257).

The definition of beliefs was taken from Brown and Cooney (1982). They explained that beliefs have qualities that have important implications for research and measurement. These qualities are dispositions to action (in which the dispositions are time and context specific) and major determinants of behavior.

The total number of UUM faculty members interviewed was eight. Participants were selected from the list of full-time academic staff members who had more than five years of classroom teaching at the university. A current list was obtained from the Office of the Registrar. Faculty members who had more than five years of classroom teaching experience were chosen because the study attempted to

describe the experiences in teaching among the senior UUM faculty members. I believe that answers from the senior faculty members would be most valuable, based on my research questions and the nature of the qualitative study. The assumption of the study was that the more experienced the faculty member had in teaching, the more stories they can tell as compared to novice lecturers. Teaching rank was also used as one of the criteria in selecting participants. The teaching ranks of the UUM full-time faculty members were professors, associate professors, lecturers and language teachers. As the lecturers were the largest group, they were selected to participate in this study.

Participants were also selected from each of the schools: School of Languages and Scientific Thinking, School of Economics, School of Management, School of Accounting, School of Social Development, and School of Information Technology. This provided the opportunity to get different stories from faculty members in different contexts.

Participants were requested to speak in English during both the interviews. This was to avoid my own bias in translating and interpreting (from the Malay language to the English language) responses from the interview. I have provided the nearest meaning to the words in the English language wherever Malay words were used in the conversation.

I had an equal representation of male and female respondents for the interviews. Six out of the eight respondents were married. A number of them had between 20 to 28 years of teaching experience. Four of them were secondary school teachers before they joined the university as lecturers. In terms of academic qualifications, three of the respondents had doctoral degrees and the other five had master's degrees. All respondents were graduates of overseas universities who have obtained at least one formal degree (bachelor's, master's, or doctoral) abroad.

There were two in-depth interviews conducted in the study. The first one was open-ended interview and the second one was semi-structured.

I analyzed the data obtained through the interviews using content analysis. This involved the process of sorting, classifying, and analyzing the data to identify emerging themes and patterns. The conventional way of doing this analysis is to use color pencils and pens to underline coding units and then cut them out and placed them in different categories. This process continues until it leads to the development of a hypothesis grounded in the data. Then the emerging hypothesis will be reviewed against negative cases and more new data.

With the development of technology in education, several computer software programs have been developed to help in analyzing data in qualitative studies. Miles and Huberman (1994) listed some of the uses of computer software in qualitative studies:

making notes; writing up or transcribing field notes; editing; coding; storage; search and retrieval; data linking; memoing; content analysis; data display; conclusion-drawing and verification; theory-building; graphic mapping; and preparing interim and final report (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 44).

I used the computer software, Folio VIEWS, to assist me in analyzing the data of my study.

TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE STUDY

The trustworthiness of the study was evaluated through four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility

The first criterion of trustworthiness addresses the questions of how credible are the particular findings of the study and by what criteria can we judge them?

In this study, credibility was established through peer debriefing, member checking, and negative case analysis. I also established credibility of the study through what is referred to as "a researcher as instrument statement."

Peer debriefing is a procedure whereby the researcher confides in trusted and knowledgeable colleagues and uses them as a sounding board for one or more purposes (Schwandt, 1997). It involves sharing ideas about procedures and logistics in the field to get advice and check dependability of ways of proceeding, and it involves sharing evolving attempts at describing and analyzing qualitative data to achieve some kind of consensual validation. My peer debriefer (a qualitative expert) and I met regularly for discussions and I kept a record of our meetings.

One of the purposes of member checking is to put "the respondent on record as having said certain things and having agreed to the correctness of the investigator's recording of them, thereby making it difficult later for the respondents to claim misunderstanding or investigator error" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314). Apart from that, member checking provides the respondents the opportunity to respond to the researcher's constructions and interpretations. Respondents may correct errors and challenge what are perceived to be wrong interpretations. This activity will stimulate the respondents to recall additional things that were not mentioned the first time round. Furthermore, the respondents are able to assess the overall adequacy of the findings. In other words, member checking provides the opportunity to gather data about the integrity of the researcher's findings. Member checking, in addition, helps the researcher to summarize findings of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, I have asked the respondents to check and react to their responses. I gave the respondents the interview transcripts to be

reviewed. First, I sent them a letter explaining the purpose of member checking, along with a structured form to fill in their responses. Second, as I was at UUM for the data collection, I gave the forms to the faculty members several weeks after interviews were conducted and after the tapes were transcribed. The forms were then collected from the faculty members individually. Finally, I incorporated their suggestions and recommendations into my dissertation writing.

When analyzing the data, negative case analysis were used to account for all known cases. Data that do not support the emerging themes were reviewed by testing and refining them continuously. Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. 230) argued that "there are no guidelines specifying how and how long to search for negative cases or how to find alternative hypotheses given a specified body of qualitative data." This is also supported by Lincoln and Guba (1986). They stated that it is the researcher's duty to search until no further negative cases are found.

The section on "a researcher as instrument statement" contains autobiographical information specifically describing my role as a researcher. My own interests and personal involvement in the topic, as well as my teaching experience at UUM were provided. This allows the readers to reach conclusions regarding the extent to which my own biases may influence findings of the study.

Transferability

The second criterion of trustworthiness concerns how transferable and applicable are the findings to another setting or group of people. In qualitative research, the use of "thick description" will allow readers to understand and draw their own interpretations (Patton, 1990). In this study, I have attempted to provide a detailed description of the context in which the research takes place so that the readers would be able to make judgments as to how well the findings are transferable to other situations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Dependability

The third criterion of trustworthiness is dependability, that is to answer the question - how can we be reasonably sure that the findings would be replicated if the study were conducted with the same participants in the same context? Some of the techniques suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 317) are "overlap methods," "stepwise replication," and "audit trail." Dependability in this study was satisfied by using the technique "audit trail." The purpose of the audit is to render a judgment about the dependability of procedures employed by the inquirer and the extent to which the conclusions or findings of the study are confirmable. I submitted my work to be audited by an auditor (a qualitative expert) and she was very pleased with the outcome of the work.

Confirmability

The fourth criterion of trustworthiness concerns how can we be sure that the findings are reflective of the subjects and the inquiry itself rather than a creation of the researcher's biases or prejudices. In qualitative research, the researcher is interested in providing evidence to allow readers to confirm results of his/her study. Some of the techniques used in establishing confirmability are audit trail, triangulation, member checking, and reflexive journal (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking and audit trail have been discussed in the sections on credibility and dependability, respectively. Triangulation involves the use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories (Denzin, 1978). It establishes both credibility and confirmability of the study. A reflexive journal is also a useful record for confirming data and interpretations. In this study, confirmability was provided through audit trail, member checking, and reflexive journal. I recorded my personal reflections in the journal. This writing was given to my auditor. I also submitted my log to be read by my peer debriefer.

FINDINGS

Dimensions Of Teaching

This section described responses from each of the respondents to the questions about their beliefs, the meanings of teaching, and ways to enhance learning. In the open-ended interviews, faculty members were asked about their beliefs about teaching, and what meanings they attached to the term "teaching." In the semi-structured interview, they were asked what they did to enhance learning. Responses of the participants' beliefs about teaching and ways to enhance teaching were analyzed and divided into dimensions of teaching so that I would be able to compare them to the studies done by Dunkin and Clawson.

The first dimension consists of responses that enhance learning in a structural way. Some of the statements made by participants in the study to support "teaching as structuring learning" dimension include:

I try to make the students understand by giving more examples...

Sometimes I explain on the chalkboard and do this step-by-step ..the problems.. I show to them how to solve the equation...

I provide them information and relate to them what I know about the subject.

I start with the objective.. what are the things that students are supposed to know and then try my best to achieve what I set out for them to do.

I have my goal, like to make them be good public speakers.. then I teach them the theory and check whether they understand or not in class discussions

... I follow the course content in the manual and try to complete the syllabus. I also think about the activities, how many you can give in class, whether the activities are meaningful or not, whether the activities are really teaching them what we want them to learn.

Explanations must be clear, explain slowly... not too many things at the same time.

The second dimension consists of responses that motivate learning. Some of the statements to support "teaching as motivating learning" dimension include:

Well, apart from that.. talking about getting them to speak up, we still have to motivate them. Motivation has to be done because they're not very inclined to speak up. That's one thing I find, not only in the current situation but of all the years that I've been teaching here. The thing that is very common among our students, they are very reluctant to speak in English, so we really have to give them a lot of prompts and so on.

We have to convince them that there is potential in whatever they are doing. It will be used up later on when they go out to teach, OK. So, that's motivating students and we have to tell them that... if they want to develop themselves, they have to keep up with their own reading.

I try to provide interesting materials so that they will not get bored or else they will sleep in class.

My role as a motivator....I start off the class by asking them to comment on the previous class and spend time with them to talk about what they like or not like in the classroom.

The third dimension consists of responses that encourage activities in learning. Some of the statements to support "teaching as encouraging activity and independence in learning" dimension include:

I try to impress on them the importance of the English language. Some of these students are not interested in the subject. They think it's not important to know English. I encourage them to use the language in and outside of classroom.

They can comment on my materials. I encourage them to do so in class and

I do like them to talk about their own experiences.

I always advice them to utilize the Self-Access Center that we have in the school and this is free to all students. They can go in during the specified time and we have materials from beginners level right up to the advance level in the different areas of...looking at the different skills in English language.

I call them to my room and try to build up their confidence.

I told them to always seek out for new knowledge and to add those new knowledge to whatever knowledge that they have gathered thus far.

The fourth dimension consists of responses that establish interpersonal relations conducive to learning. Some of the statements to support "teaching as establishing interpersonal relations conducive to learning" dimension include:

I try to be caring. Those are the values that I want to inculcate in them, to care for each other you know because I feel that even though they are in an institution of the higher learning, these are the things that are quite important you know, important in their life. For example, saying assalamualaikum (greetings) you know, good morning or when you meet, you smile. I feel this is something that is lacking in our young today. Some of them don't show respect.

I have to try and make jokes in class and try to make the person feel at ease.

But I know I've learned a lot of interpersonal skills dealing with the students because you have to deal with different individuals. As far as I'm concerned, I respect them and I want them to respect me.

Well... my personality helps in my teaching especially to students of very low proficiency. I make sure that I am someone who is approachable...you see someone who is friendly and someone whom they can speak to at their own level at any time...OK...and it is more on a friendly footing

I tried to create.... teaching them in a friendly atmosphere. They can see anytime. I can be said "open" to suggestions.

A similarity among the three studies was in the distribution of responses to the dimensions of teaching. Table 4 shows the distribution of responses in the three studies:

TABLE 4: Responses to Each Dimension of Teaching

Studies & (# of participants)	Dimension1: Structure	Dimension2: Motivation	Dimension3: Encouragement	Dimension4: Relationship
Dunkin (12)	11	9	7	4
Clawson (26)	22	16	13	15
Nurahimah (8)	7	4	5	5

In all three studies, the first dimension, "teaching as structuring learning," was the most mentioned by the respondents.

Dunkin and Clawson found that the second dimension, "teaching as motivating learning," was next most mentioned. However, in this study, "teaching as encouraging activity and independence in learning" and "teaching as establishing relations conducive to learning," were mentioned an equal number of times and they were mentioned more than "teaching as motivating learning."

Participants in this study used students' reactions and behaviors in the classroom as indicators of "a good class," while students' performance and feedback were used as yardsticks to gauge "a good course." Examples of students' reactions and behaviors in the classroom used as indicators of a good class were:

- students are keen to talk and ask questions
- students contribute in discussions and activities
- students go out with a smile and they are eager after that to come back to get further information
- students show interest in the subject.

Responses in this study to the question of "how do you know when you have had a good class?" were compared to those in studies done by Dunkin and Clawson. Again, there are similarities in the findings of the three studies. Among responses given in Dunkin's study were:

has given a bad lecture...then the noise level will increase."

"The best test is student reaction; such as groups of students asking questions around the lectern at the end of the class, questions days later about controversial comments, and questions generally in class" (Dunkin, 1992, p. 492).

Among responses provided in Clawson's study were:

"when you see a lot of 'ahas': they will shake their heads and will begin to see that connection."

"...from their body language, their eye contact and my eye contact with them."

"people stay after class to talk; the kids hang out to ask questions" (Clawson, 1994, p. 79).

UUM faculty members indicated that they looked at students' feedback as an indicator of a good course. Positive feedback from their students reinforced the continuation of the methods of teaching. Negative feedback, on the other hand, indicated a need for change in their approach and/or methods of teaching.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study parallel those of Dunkin and Precians' and Clawson's studies. These findings suggest that there is a similarity in the beliefs about teaching and ways to enhance learning among the three different cultures.

The similarity may be attributed to the fact that many of the UUM lecturers studied abroad where they were exposed to theories and the practical aspects of teaching during their stay in the Western countries.

Consistent with other literature (Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992; Peck & Tucker, 1973; Richardson, 1994), teachers' past experiences shaped their beliefs, which, in turn, influenced their actions in the classroom.

In this study, the eight participants' past experiences, such as their interactions with former teachers, may have shaped their beliefs about teaching and ways to enhance learning, thus, the reason for the influence of their actions in the classrooms.

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