

High Quality Teaching in Higher Education: A Challenge and a Possibility

Juanita Sapiano

juanita.sapiano@um.edu.mt

Abstract

A shared concern in higher education establishments is the quality of teaching taking place and thereby, the quality of students leaving the college/university. While keeping in mind that quality cannot be easily defined, this paper aims to raise awareness on a number of challenges which could be impinging on the quality of education in the higher education sector. There are a number of external factors which could be attributed to the quality of teaching. However, the focus of this paper is limited to the teaching and learning process in the higher education classroom setting.

In the first section of the paper, the author raises awareness on the dynamic and complex nature of the teaching and learning process which could be affecting the quality of education in the higher education classroom. The emphasis is on the main stakeholders - the lecturers and the students – and the relationship between the two. Next, the author outlines a number of challenges which could be affecting the process. The aim is to reflect upon the teaching and learning that go on in the higher education classroom, so as to be able to align future actions. Finally, the author proposes concrete practices which can be adopted in order to overcome the challenges and improve the quality of teaching, and thereby, the quality of students leaving higher education. High quality teaching in a higher education classroom has got its challenges but it is a possibility.

Keywords: *high quality teaching, higher education, teaching-learning process, challenges.*

Quality in Higher Education

Quality in higher education is a multidimensional term (Elton 1998, Krause, 2012) which cannot be easily defined (Brockerhoff, Huisman, & Laufer 2015). It is perceived differently by the stakeholders working within the education system (Dicker et al., 2018): while employers value most highly personal qualities, students and staff rate the quality of teaching and learning, feedback, and staff-student relationships as important factors in high quality teaching.

It is the aim of this paper to reflect upon the quality of the teaching and learning process in the higher education classroom, share the challenges which could be affecting this process, and suggest concrete applications of quality teaching initiatives which can be adopted in order to improve the quality of teaching, and thereby, the quality of students leaving higher education.

The roles of the main stakeholders and the setting in which they function

The teaching and learning process in a higher education classroom is a complex one which directly involves the dynamics taking place between the two main stakeholders – the lecturers and the students. In my attempt to raise awareness on our practices, in order to be able to audit our role in the classroom so as to improve the quality of our teaching, I can neither separate the lecturer from the student nor the teaching from the learning since one cannot exist or take place without the other as they are both mutually dependent on one another. It is this same dynamic nature of the teaching-learning process that makes the discussion on the topic tricky; separating the different workings of the process for discussion's sake can give the impression that they can function in isolation.

In my attempt to outline the challenges that could be hindering the quality of teaching in the higher education classroom, I would like to first start with an attempt not to define, but to look into the multifaceted roles of the main stakeholders, these being, I believe, the key factors which are impinging on the quality of teaching in higher education.

Lecturers

The key stakeholder in the teaching and learning process who can assure high quality teaching is definitely the lecturer. It is said that the good performance of students depends upon the effective teaching of their teachers (Sanders and Rivers, 1996) and, whilst keeping in mind that one of the challenges in educational research is that of measuring the teacher's effectiveness one cannot but acknowledge that lecturers play a crucial role in this process; they are the main protagonists of the quality of teaching which takes place. It is with their quality and their competence that lecturers can enhance the teaching and learning that take place in the classroom.

Apart from pursuing excellence in their subject and in their teaching so as to assure quality education, lecturers working in higher education are encouraged to engage in other activities relating to the college and/or university in which they teach. The ever changing demands being made on them could be affecting their performance and, in turn, the learning taking place. However, for the sake of the paper and its constraints, I have limited my discussion to the challenges lecturers face in the classroom.

The Role of the Lecturer

The role of the lecturer is a complex one, one which is definitely not limited to the actual teaching of one's subject and although a common perception is that the lecturer in the higher education classroom simply imparts knowledge on the students, the reality is that if high quality teaching is to be assured, the role of the lecturer should be much wider.

It is the multidimensional role of the lecturer who must function on so many levels in the classroom that could be affecting the teaching taking place. Unless lecturers recognise, accept, and embrace this role and the load it comes with, the quality of education cannot improve. Furthermore, for high quality teaching to take place, lecturers cannot remain distant from their audience. They need to play an effective role to understand, facilitate and improve the teaching and learning. The importance of the interaction between the lecturers and the students cannot be emphasized enough. Besides, apart from the preparation and planning of lectures, which must take place with the students in mind, lecturers need to continuously make evaluations of the instruction and communication, of the learning taking place, during the actual delivery of the lecture. Lecturers need to check if their teaching is effective, if the message is reaching the students, which brings us to yet another challenge in the teaching-learning process: *how* and *when* this can be done, which will be tackled at a later stage.

It is clear that the multifaceted role of the lecturer inside the classroom is one which necessitates the lecturer to go beyond the area of expertise and demands skills most of us might not even have had training in. Teaching in a high education setting is, without doubt, a challenge. The time and energy needed to deliver effectively could be affecting the attitude towards the students, and thereby, the quality of teaching taking place.

The Students

The other protagonists who could be impacting on the teaching-learning process at this level of education are the students themselves, our target audience, and if, as we have already established, lectures should be prepared and delivered with the students in mind, perhaps the biggest next challenge we face is getting to *know* them, *how* we are going to do it, and *when*.

If we had to take a higher education college as an example, perhaps the only knowledge or assurance lecturers have about their students is that the great majority have completed secondary school and they have the entry requirements to attend college, and that most, though not all, have come to follow a course of study which leads to their certificate, diploma, or degree. Their role should be simple: to follow the programme of studies, attend lectures, hand in assessment tasks, study, and sit

for exams by the end of which their efforts are rewarded. If one had to stop here, then, the role of the lecturer would be straightforward: a homogeneous audience of students with the same objective.

This is not, however, the reality lecturers are faced with in the higher education classroom: the audience cannot be more heterogeneous. Students come from different backgrounds, have experienced learning environments which are equally diverse, have different preferred learning patterns, varied abilities, skills, interests, and are at a level of maturity which varies from student to student. A good number juggle between school life and work, and/or other commitments. Furthermore, the fact that the students we work with are at the critical and sensitive age between puberty and adulthood, it is not surprising that understanding their needs and frame of mind can be baffling.

The quality of teaching and learning can never be of high quality unless we learn how to 'listen' to the students. Teaching cannot be successful unless we address their needs and/or learn about what motivates and engages them in the lesson. Getting to know the students can be a challenge but it is definitely not impossible. Lecturers need to evaluate the students' reactions to what is being taught, look for cues, and read their body language. Forming a relationship with the students is one way of overcoming this challenge. The reality is that lecturers can no longer walk into a class and deliver the contents without engaging students if they want effective teaching to take place and if high quality teaching is to materialise.

The Higher Education Classroom Setting

Lectures: large group teaching

Another aspect which could be affecting the quality of teaching taking place in higher education is definitely the structure within which learning occurs. Lectures, which mainly consist of classes with relatively large groups of students, are one of the main structures in which the teaching-learning is done in higher education.

Large classes can be a challenge for both the lecturer and the students. Firstly, apart from the expertise in the subject being taught, lecturers need confidence, skill, mastery, and awareness of the surroundings, of the learning in process (or not) for high quality teaching to take place. Secondly, forming a relationship with the students in classes with a large number of students can be a daunting task for some. Another reason why the teaching-learning process could be affected is because it can take students some time to adjust to these new classroom settings, and in the process lose focus and interest, which can have repercussions on the whole programme of study. It is up to the lecturers to generate and maintain interest, and engage students in a lecture setting. This can definitely be a challenge, one which needs to be addressed if lecturers are to assure high quality teaching in

higher education. Another challenge for the lecturer, though less frequent in higher education, could be the disruptions in the class. We know that the use of technology has almost become a must, and the continuous use of gadgets by students during lectures can be a distraction to students and lecturer alike.

Seminars and Tutorials

Seminars and tutorials are two other classroom settings offered in higher education to provide effective reinforcement to large group teaching. They also present opportunities for lecturers to provide a space where students' ideas and intellectual development may be nurtured by way of discussion and reflection. Small group teaching is also an ideal setting to get to know the students. Unlike the lecture, seminars and tutorials should not be the place for 'input' but rather a place for guidance (Fry, Ketteridge, & Marshall, 2008). The latter can prove to be a challenge for lecturers who are reluctant to take a step back from lecturing, and who feel the need to continuously 'impart knowledge'. Students need 'spaces' where they can show lecturers that they are learning; seminars and tutorials are the spaces where this can be done.

The type of feedback given to students on the tasks assigned can also be a challenge which could be affecting the learning process. Lecturers have doubts about how much and how feedback should be given, whether it should be written or delivered face to face, or both. To provide written feedback is time consuming but definitely worthwhile if done properly. However, once again, we have doubts on whether our students take the feedback on board, whether they get disheartened by the amount of feedback or the grade given. How effective the feedback lecturers give their students is, will remain a mystery unless lecturers take a step further and ask students for their opinion on the feedback they are given, on the teaching and learning process.

Factors affecting the quality of teaching

The role of the lecturer, the students' cohort, the dynamics between the two, the demands made on the students and the lecturers, the feedback given and the setting in which learning takes place in higher education, could be contributing to the quality of teaching. I have established that in today's context, walking into a higher education classroom and imparting knowledge for a whole hour will not result in high quality teaching and learning. A teacher-centred classroom is not conducive to effective teaching and learning. Rather, an effective higher education teacher is one who is focused on the learning taking place in the classroom.

I have attempted to raise awareness of some of the challenges involved in the process. In the following section, I will suggest ways in which the quality of the teaching and learning process in the higher education classroom can be improved.

Suggestions for Quality Teaching Practices

Get to know the students

One practice I have been using in both small and large classes in order to get to know the students is to distribute a short questionnaire in the very first week of the programme of study. The main aim is to make the students think about the choice they have made, to see why the students have chosen to further their studies in the subject and if they have an idea as to what the programme of study entails. It always turns out to be a good ice breaker which raises the students' awareness about their attitude towards the subject they will be studying. It also provides the lecturer with information about the audience: insights into students' conceptions are one of the foundations of successful curriculum development, class teaching, and valid assessment methods (Ramsden, 1992).

Make students aware of the learning taking place

Another practice which could improve the quality of teaching in class is to make students aware of the learning which is taking place. At the beginning of the programme of studies, lecturers should provide students with an overview of the course of study, project the syllabus together with the learning objectives which they must be able to master by the end of the two-year course. 'Ticking' the skills/topics they master on the way is also a good way to show students that they have progressed and how closer they are to the end. Some of the students might have chosen the subject being taught without any idea of what it involves; I have found that showing them which skills they have grasped, where they are heading to and the skills left to master is a good way to encourage focus, confidence, achievement, and direction.

Check students' understanding

Another practice which is conducive to enhancing learning is that of continuously checking if students are understanding. We have already established that students can get lost unless engaged in the subject, how easy it is that they remain passive listeners, that they become invisible in a large class. It is with this awareness in mind that I find myself asking, at intervals, if students are following, if they are lost and whether I can move on to the next step in my lecture.

Give students time to process information and show what they have learnt

Providing students with time to think in order to be able to process the information, and, where necessary, apply the new skills, are also practices to be encouraged. It is the responsibility of lecturers not only to create opportunities for students to show that they have learned a concept or skill but also to provide feedback on their performance. In this way, both the lecturers and the students can act on the feedback given. This also sheds light on the importance of frequent assessment tasks; leaving the latter to the end of the term can be too late. Feedback should be sought by both stakeholders regularly if high quality learning is to be assured.

Break lectures into smaller chunks

One other practice I have been adopting in these last few years is to make sure that one-hour lectures are broken down, as far as possible, into smaller chunks, alternating between delivery of new material, semi-informal discussions, and short tasks to check understanding. Lectures during which I talk for the whole hour have become a rarity in my teaching. In this way, I try to make sure students are actively involved in the learning process.

Repeat success criteria, important theories, diction

Another successful approach is that of constantly reminding students of the success criteria for assessment. While delivering my lectures, I also put emphasis on, and make sure that I frequently use diction and phrases which students are encouraged to use in their writing.

Remind students about brain processing

Students also need to be constantly reminded that the learning of content and that of skills requires different brain processing. It is important to engage students, to bring to their attention the process the brain goes through to learn skills etc., so as to facilitate retention. A misconception on the part of many students furthering their higher education is their belief that a subject consists only of large amounts of factual knowledge or a mastery of steps or rules, and that, in order to become the expert, all one needs to do is add knowledge to one's existing store. It is the responsibility of the lecturer to challenge and change such limited conceptions, and to ensure that their teaching, the curricula they design, and the assessments they set, take students into more stretching areas such as critical thinking, creativity and synthesis. (Biggs, 1999).

Focus on what the students do

The main focus should be on what the students do. Students must be actively involved and engaged if learning is to take place. It is through their output, tasks and assessments assigned that lecturers can make sure that students have learned, that the learning objectives have been met. It is then up to the lecturer to 'align' (Biggs, 1999) the teaching and approaches to the feedback elicited from the students' output/performance.

Ask for feedback

Finally, a practice which has become standard in my teaching, is to ask students for feedback on the teaching and learning which takes place during my lectures, seminars, and tutorials. This is done through the use of a structured questionnaire. The responses provide an insight into the teaching and learning, what appealed to students, what worked, and what could have been done better. The questionnaire also provides students with opportunities to make suggestions on what could be done to further improve the quality of the teaching and learning. The feedback is taken on board, and future lectures and methodologies are modified accordingly to maximise the quality of teaching. This can be a challenge for a number of lecturers. However, if students are to be provided with high quality education, their feedback should be sought.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper was written with the awareness that researchers are still struggling to understand the causal link between the lecturers' engagement in teaching and the learning which takes place, and that institutions still find it difficult to demonstrate the direct impact of the lecturers on the quality of education students get in higher education. However, my years of experience in the classroom, literature, and the data collected from feedback I receive from students on the teaching and learning that take place in my lectures, all point to a number of factors which could be attributed to the quality of teaching in the higher education classroom.

The discussion was limited to a number of factors which could be affecting the quality of teaching in the higher education classroom. I have convincingly argued that the teaching-learning process is a dynamic process which cannot be easily assessed since it combines various determinants, among which the skills of lecturers, the students' experience, the quality of the relationship between students and the lecturer, the students' engagement, the tasks and feedback given and the setting in which learning takes place. It is the nature of this dynamic process which makes teaching at this level challenging.

High Quality Teaching in Higher Education: A Challenge and a Possibility

High quality teaching in a higher education classroom can be challenging but not impossible. Among the critical components for high quality teaching we find: teaching methods and strategies used to facilitate student learning, a student-centred classroom, interactions which encourage interest, engagement and confidence and tasks assigned to check students' learning. The study also highlights the importance of the constant need for feedback to be able to review methods, pedagogies, and the learning taking place in the classroom. Ultimately, high quality teaching is possible if the teaching that is done in the higher education classroom, is planned and delivered with the valuable data collected from the students' feedback in mind, hence the importance of regular and appropriate evaluation on which to make future decisions. For high quality teaching in a higher education classroom to materialise, for effective learning to take place, lecturers are encouraged to align their practices to what the students do (Briggs, 1999).

References

- Biggs, J. (1999) What the Student Does: teaching for enhanced learning. Higher Education Research & Development, Vol. 18, No. 1. [Online] University of New South Wales. Available from: https://gu.se/infogluCalendar/digitalAssets/1776442808_BifogadFil_Biggs.pdf [Accessed 7th August 2019].
- Brockerhoff, L., Huisman, J. & Laufer, M. (2015) Quality in Higher Education. [Online] Belgium. Available from: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/19460171.2017.1300540> [Accessed 5th June 2015].
- Hénard, F Learning our lesson: Review of Quality Education in Higher Education. [Online] Available from: <https://www.oecd.org/education/imhe/44058352.pdf> [Accessed 4th July 2019].
- Dicker, R. et al. (2018) What does 'quality' in higher education mean? Perceptions of staff, students and employers Studies in Higher Education. [Online] <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2018.1445987> [Accessed 25th May 2019].
- Elton, L. (1998). Dimensions of excellence in university teaching, International Journal for Academic Development. [Online] UK 3:1, 3-11[Accessed 15th June 2019].
- Fry, H., Kitteridge, S., Marshall S. (2008). Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, Enhancing Academic Practice. New York, Routledge.
- Krause, K. (2012) Addressing the wicked problem of quality in higher education: theoretical approaches and implications, Higher Education Research & Development, 31:3, 285-297, [Online] DOI: 10.1080/07294360.2011.634381 [Accessed 1st August 2019].
- Mamoon-Al-Bashir (2016) The Value and Effectiveness of Feedback in Improving Students' Learning and Professionalizing Teaching in Higher Education. Journal of Education and Practice ISSN 2222-288X [Online] UK Vol.7, No.16, 2016 [Accessed 2nd June 2019].
- Ramsden, P. (1992) Learning to teach in higher education. London, Routledge.
- Sanders, W. L. and Rivers, J. C. (1996) Cumulative and Residual Effects of Teachers on Future Academic Achievement. University of Tennessee Value-Added Research and Assessment Center 225 Morgan Hall P.O. Box 1071 Knoxville, Tennessee 37901-I 071.

Bio-note

Juanita Sapiano graduated B.A.(Gen) in English and Psychology at the University of Malta and M.A (Applied Linguistics and TESOL) at the University of Leicester. She is currently a Senior Lecturer in the English Department at the University of Malta Junior College and a member on the Junior College Quality Assurance board. Her main area of interest is the teaching and learning of English as a Second Language (L2). Ms Sapiano has been teaching English for 22 years. Between 2011 and 2014 she also held the role of Deputy Head in charge of curriculum in a Church Secondary School. She has also held seminars and lectures for teachers on the teaching of English as a L2. Recently, she has been conducting research on the value and effectiveness of feedback in the classroom.