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STUDENTS AS PARTNERS IN CO-CREATION OF LEARNING ACTIVITIES IN ORDER TO INCLUDE DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

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Abstract

Students of diverse learning skills and capacities are likely to express dissatisfaction with generic content of learning activities as not meeting their learning expectations. As such, this paper is interested in how co-creation of learning activities with students as partners can be harnessed to accommodate differentiated learning instruction in higher education settings. Therefore, action research is seen as possible intervention for challenges of inadequate learning expectation. Similar learning intervention showed effective practice of engaging students by valuing their contribution based on prior knowledge and experiences of what they could bring into the classroom. Differentiated learning with the use of students as partners is capable of addressing issues of individual differences, cultural and linguistic diversity.

Keywords: Students-as-partners, co-creation, learning activities, differentiated instruction.

Introduction

The paper adopted the theoretical concept of , who postulated the following basic steps in action research, that operates side-by side with action plans. This include; review of current plan, identify specific aspect that require investigation, imagine an alternative practice, implement the imaginative practice, take stock of what happens, modify current practice in line with evidence – try other options if necessary, monitor the current practice, review and evaluate the modified practice. Following the introduction of Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in 2015 by the UK Higher Education, it is now imperative that teaching and learning aligns compatibly with students expectations. Therefore, the aim of this study is particular about the following:

- (i) Co-creation of conducive and effective learning materials/activities.
- (ii) Encourage students engagement with learning outcomes and activities in advance.
- (iii) Better alignment of learning content with learners' expectations.
- (iv) Acknowledgement of differentiation in addressing issues of diversity in learning (dis)abilities.

Operationally, definition of key terms within the context of this paper include, *co-creation of knowledge* defined as the process of utilizing students as partners in organising learning materials (short videos, photographs or audio files) that aligns compatibly with learners' learning expectation and module learning outcomes. On the other hand, *differentiated learning* is defined as the inclusion of 'online learning Padlet' that houses learning materials – to aid learning process.

It is pertinent to acknowledge that, there are other useful action research models

about evaluative and reflective teaching practices; . However, McNiff model is adopted because it seem to be compatible with the implementation of differentiated instruction for improving student's learning as discussed in the following step by step procedures.

1. Review of current plan

Review of current teaching practice as postulated by is adopted in the present active enquiry after critical review and evaluation of the following sources of data: (i) synopsis of current learning activities (ii) module guides and specifications (iii) existing literature review (see section 2.1 below). The above sources of information were useful in shaping the active enquiry and intervention.

As mentioned earlier, the present action research became essential following students' lack of engagement resulting to low attendance in learning activities such as lecture and seminar sessions. In addition, the module evaluation and literature suggested that poor attendance in learning could be due to perceived irrelevance of learning activities in which students believed that, the learning content is not meeting their learning expectations.

2. Identify specific aspect that require investigation

The next step of action research as underlined in McNiff (2010) is to further identify specific aspects of current teaching practices that require investigation. As such, literature review will include; overview of differentiated learning instructions and allied theories, and the involvement of students' as active partners in shaping their own learning.

2.1. Literature review

Due to students diversity and learning capabilities, some 'fast learners' in the classroom settings may be preoccupied with unchallenging curriculum as well as slow pace of instruction. However, many teachers appear to be ignorant of these factors. Inability of teachers to swiftly identify students' abilities and meeting their individual's learning expectation may lead to poor engagement . By definition, student engagement entails "positive involvement in programmes through active participation and interaction at a class level".

The above definition further underpins the notion that, it is essential to engage students with learning activities that gets them more involved, which therefore, serves as essential steps towards improving student learning expectation ; . In addition, it is also important to blend students learning expectation with enhanced learning outcome. This combination has shown to facilitate students' attainment of better degree and general improvement of future life skills . It is also pertinent to note that, mastery of essential skills for future life efficiency constitutes part of the aims of the module under active enquiry . Although, other literature have critiqued that, pedagogies that promote students engagement are mostly less student-centred or less personalised . In order to further understand the concept of student engagement, it is important to briefly review the following theories of learning.

2.1.1. Theories of differentiated learning instructions

Based on the rationale for the active enquiry, student learning in this context would be explore from the perspective of differentiated instruction. This is a learning and teaching model in which content is re-organized to accommodate various learners with different intelligence while retaining the module learning outcomes . In order words, differentiating class instruction is teaching and learning that recognises a set of students

with varying talents and learning styles. This model of learning is germane with theoretical underpinnings such as the Gardner's theory of multiple intelligence and Vygotsky's zone of proximal development.

The Gardner's theory of multiple intelligence in which differentiated instruction is based upon suggests that students learn through various intelligences. These individual learner's intelligences include interpersonal/intrapersonal, verbal/linguistic, visual/spatial, bodily/kinaesthetic, logical/mathematical, musical and naturalist intelligences; . Based on this theoretical model, it is therefore essential to provide students with various learning options that are compatible with their individual's talents/intelligence rather than just one or two ways across the entire students. In organising class learning activities, each student's learning intelligence is eminent. For example, evidence from literature have shown that, student often rely on their favourite intelligence in order to complete a task. The essentials of differentiated learning instruction is aptly put in which states that, "when teachers allow learners to solve problems using the learners' preferred intelligence, they provide scaffolding and create more opportunities for their students to be successful".

Although, several studies suggests that there is no strong evidence to support the postulation of multiple intelligence and should not be the basis for educational practice;'. In addition, postulation of multiple intelligence has been discredited in neuroscience perspective. For example, neural processing pathways for motor, music, language and emotional skills suggests that, intelligence is unlikely to function "via a different set of neural mechanisms"). However, despite the various criticism of multiple intelligence, it is apparent that individual students may in some ways differ in their learning preferences. Therefore, the audio/visual component of the theory of multiple intelligence would be helpful for teaching intervention in order to aid peer/group interactive learning.

Differentiated learning instruction is also based on Vygotsky's zone of proximal development – is concerned with level in which a learner can perform certain tasks with the guidance of a teacher or other peers that have advance learning of the instruction. The theory further explained the essential benefits attached to learners with various learning capacities at different levels, to work and complete learning tasks at their appropriate individual zones of proximal development. Just like Gardner's theory of multiple intelligence in building scaffolding, the Vygotsky's zone of proximal development opined that, teachers could teach students who experience difficulty grasping certain concepts in a manner that allows the learner to understand the concepts and later proceed with further learning at their own pace or zones of proximal development.

Vygotsky's zone of proximal development is concerned with the stage of development that is crucial for learning so that students could complete learning activities at a level in which they explore unknown and new content but not to the point of frustration. This is essential because learning of content that is frustrating may lead to disengagement. In addition, a physiological brain research supported the rationale for differentiated learning instruction. For example, have associated different brain activities with various learning situations such as the release of noradrenalin which is a hormone that affects learning areas. That is, when learners become frustrated due to content difficulties they release more noradrenalin which leads to inappropriate learners conduct or withdrawal.

The implication of this to differentiated learning is that, learners would be provided with learning 'scaffolding' that is sufficient to enable them complete basic tasks and higher order learning tasks independently. Within the scope of differentiated learning, students with more knowledge would be given opportunities to assist their

fellow students who needs more assistance within their zones of proximal development in order to crystallised their learning.

On the other hand, learning instruction that is below the student readiness may also leads to disengagement. Thus, when learners are instructed in a manner that do not meet their learning expectation, fewer noradrenalin are released. Consequently, this practice led many above-average students felt less stimulated and less motivated to learn. However, based on the reviewed theories and literature, teachers and other classroom practitioners could avoid the consequences of inappropriate learning activities by implementing the concepts of differentiated learning instructions. As such, all students would receive stimulating learning instructions and meets their individual learning expectation.

Scholars have argued that any student could learn any subject regardless of differentiation according to levels of multiple intelligence (. However, based on current review of the learning activities and the quest to meet students learning expectations, it is therefore, important to expatiate on the notion of utilizing students as partners in organising and shaping their own learning. This is particularly essential in order to ensure sustainable learning that could meet students' learning expectation being partners in shaping their learning experience.

2.1.2. Students as partners in organising and shaping their own learning

The term 'partner' and 'partnership' would be use in this context to indicate a joint working between students and lecturer. In addition, partnership working would entail openness and regular communication on agreed shared goals and values between the partners. This learning and teaching partnership between students and lecturer is supported in literature. For example, the Quality Assurance Agency QAA (2013) has shown that both the students and the lecturer in the partnership are legitimate. In specific, the students' role as partners in this context is to search and add useful video clips into an online Padlet. On the other hand, the lecturer's role as partner would then entailed filtering of suggested video clips that met the inclusion requirement of the learning outcome.

Therefore, engaging students as active partners in their own learning is instrumental to active learning and students engagement. Several studies have shown that active learning is essential to meaningful student learning ; . In addition, learning and teaching evidence have shown that students appreciate active learning. For instance, the 2012 National Union of Student (NUS) in conjunction with the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) conducted a research on student experience and found that, the response that was most frequent is 'what, if anything, would improve the quality of teaching and learning experience at your university?' Of the 4,440 students who responded, 50.2% opted for 'more interactive group teaching sessions/tutorials', this compared with 26.1% who opted for 'more lectures' . This imply that, the short video intervention as a source of learning and the basis for student interaction during learning session is strongly supported in the above literature.

More illustratively, as earlier mentioned that students' role may include active participation in searching for useful photographs/images, short video clips or audio files that aligns with the learning outcomes. This learning approach has also been supported in literature. For example, argued that, students learning and engagement is significantly enhance through active students' participations that takes place both in the class and outside of the class. In addition, the advantage of utilizing students as partners helps them to prepare for future roles of full partnership as employees. This skills further aligns with the module aim of attaining a successful future aspiration and attainment.

3. Imagine an alternative practice

As opined in and based on current reviewed of teaching practice in line with existing literature, the following alternative teaching practice have been imagined and enumerated in the form of intervention and action steps as illustrated below.

For instance, learning activity may include short video clip to encourage active participation and further augment classroom interactive learning. This approach in supported in) that action research "aim to address one small aspect of your work. While it might be true that you cannot change the world, you can certainly change your bit of it; and if everyone changed a small bit at a time, a lot of change could happen quickly" (p. 15). Therefore, an inclusion of differentiated learning with audio/visual components that aligns with learners' intelligence could make a huge improvement in their learning outcome.

For example, the QAA benchmark and the British Psychological Society (BPS) guidelines stipulates that graduates of psychology degree are expected to gained specific skills, such as, the ability to engage in critical reasoning and debate based on scientific evidence. This imply that, presentation of short video clip as a basis for classroom debate in line with the module learning outcome has been supported in both the QAA and BPS requirement for learning.

The proposed student centred materials are expected to be engrained into the learning activities, in order to support the learning outcomes and to foster both formative and summative assessment activities. It is also pertinent to note that all other sections of the learning sessions remained the same except for the introduction of short video component that would last approximately 15 minutes. The 15 minute period include seeing the video clip alongside with peer/group interaction.

4. Implement the imaginative practice

Implementing the imaginative practice is the fourth step in model of active research. However, the proposed intervention has some logistic constraints which is limited only to changes associated with learning activities and would not affect the entire module content. Therefore, the proposed learning intervention of utilizing students as partners in organising and shaping their own learning in order to implement a differentiated instruction would require approval from the module leaders.

5. Take stock of what happens

As underlined in , taking stock of what happens at the various stages of implementing action research intervention constitute an essential aspect of evidence-based classroom practice of effective teaching and learning. The planned intervention of utilizing students as partners in organising and shaping their own learning using differentiated instructions should be evaluated after 6 or 12 weeks of learning sessions. The evaluation exercise may involve parameters such as (i) learning attendance retention (ii) students' coursework progression (iii) sharing of evaluation feedback with module leaders and other colleagues , while re-thinking other creative ways of implementing the intervention.

Other stages of active enquiry such as (6) modify current practice in line with evidence – try other options if necessary (7) monitor the current practice (8) review and evaluate the modified practice – would be implemented after practical implementation of the first 5 stages of McNiff (2010). This is essential and noting that classroom practice might be unpredictable, the actions from students and lecturers do not often occur in a straightforward pattern. Therefore, subsequent practice would aligned with the list of

actions plans above as illustrated in as also shown in the action reflection cycle (see Figure 2 below):

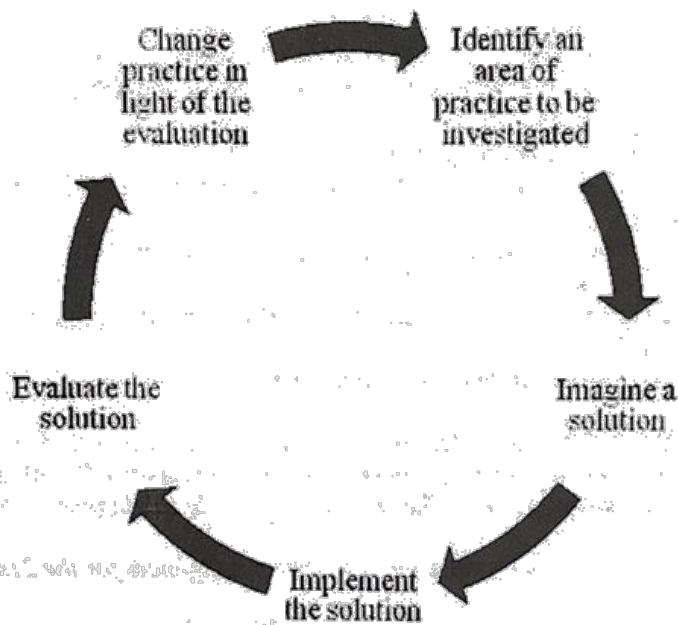


Figure 2: Snowing MCNIIT (2010) reflective action cycle

The chain of activities displayed in figure 1 above, showed that, the essence of action research which is defined as a practical way of checking our classroom practice, as to whether it meets our expectation. This is a practitioner based research also known as self-reflective practice because the research is done by the practitioner; about our practice and it involves thinking and reflecting on our practice. Most essentially, action research could be seen as open-ended practice which involves a continues self-evaluations – a procedure similar to other professional context such as self-assessment, appraisal and monitory.

Conclusion

The aim of the proposed intervention in terms of involving students as partners in knowledge co-creation to implement a differentiated learning materials in learning session is enormous. These would include but not limited to the (a) co-creation of conducive and effective learning materials and activities; (b) better alignment of module content with learners' expectations; (c) differentiation addresses issues of diversity in learning abilities. In addition, this learning and teaching intervention is in line with the evolving diversity of students' learning needs and expectations. However, this intervention may also require hard work with advance preparation in order to ensure smooth implementation.

More so, as a reflective classroom practitioner with adequate knowledge of active enquiry, it is worthwhile for future practice to adopt a continuous process of identifying areas with possible teaching and learning challenges to be investigated; appropriation of imaginative solutions to potential teaching and learning challenges; practical implementation of possible solution; subsequent evaluation of the solution; and then, change practice in light of the evaluation as supported in.

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