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A Study of "Shared Teaching" and "Video Conferencing in Classrooms" as Techniques for Improving English Literature Learning Experience

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Abstract

Globalisation and the emergence of internet in all fields of human affairs have brought unprecedented changes in higher academics. Physical and political boundaries are now hardly any barrier in restricting access to knowledge or information. Learning is a social process, and it typically tries to enhance an individual's knowledge and understanding through solo activities, as well as group and peer interaction. Thus, one of the key learning skills is that of communication. Through collaboration, learning becomes more effective. And for such collaborative learning, effective communication tools and channels are necessary pre-requisites. And in today's world, the exponential importance of English as the most effective means of communication between people of different cultures and countries, cannot be denied. Internationalism in higher education has become the latest concern for universities across the world. And for the teaching and learning of English (both the language skill and its literature), this internationalism can only be an added advantage. Tools of ICT are often considered relevant only for facilitating the teaching and learning of science subjects. Technology is an important aspect of modern life. Science and technology contribute to human well-being in perceptible ways and thus our society likes investing in science and technology because they provide us with provisions for life. Literature provides us with visions, ideas and understanding that we can apply to our lives. However, literature does not bring about any quantitative change. Its impact is intangible and incalculable in terms of quantity. Humanities or literary discourse brings out qualitative changes that remain countless. A good poem or novel may not be able to provide material comforts, but they can inspire, motivate, heal and change the readers. Revolutions have been brought about because of the power of literature. Thus, the importance of studying literature will always be relevant for human beings. What needs to be kept in mind today, however, is that science and technology and humanities are complementary and scientific innovations like video conferencing and shared teaching, when used in Literature classrooms, only serve to increase the understanding of the prescribed texts for the students. This paper proposes to study two such innovative techniques of teaching English literature in Palestinian HEIs—shared teaching (where two teachers, one local and one preferably English share classes within the classroom) and video conference classes (where students can listen to teachers in distant locations, even overseas; and have exposure to other cultures and modes of teaching). The aim of this study is to see how these innovations improve the learning experience of Palestinian students opting to study English Literature in their B.A. courses. The analytical method will mostly be applied for completing this study.

Keywords: Innovative Teaching Techniques, Shared Teaching, Video Conferencing, Internationalism, ELT, Qualitative Research, Classroom Teaching, Social Changes, Empirical Disciplines

Introduction

Higher education institutions today are constantly facing demands for greater productivity and accountability, while there is scarcity of methods and has limited resources available. To help

educational organizations adapt to constantly changing conditions and expectations, collaborative efforts are needed. One method for adapting to these changes is a form of teaching that is now being popular as "shared teaching".

Discussion

In the traditional mode of learning, often called the 'chalk and talk' method, classrooms are the centres of learning, where the students sit through lectures and take notes. Their learning is timetabled for them by the institution. In such scenarios, students often rely on rote learning and blindly reproduce that formula learning in the exam scripts, instead of focusing on actually understanding the topics. They may not feel motivated to be more active participants in the learning process, though a good lecturer does sometimes succeed in making them more active. In distance learning, on the other hand, the learner is compelled by distance to assume a degree of autonomy and responsibility for his /her own learning. In the same way, in distance education, the instructor's role too, has to undergo a change-they have to be more supporting and helping, in the limited time they get for interacting with their students. But again, this reduced opportunity for interaction with peers, which is generally the case with Distance education, can often discourage/demotivate the students. However, as sociological research has proved, the general human desire for company, connection and competition are all important in the learning process of students as well. Students who are cut off from peers, and educated in solitary set ups, may benefit from more focussed attention from the tutor; but might also feel bored and disinterested, and feel tempted to drop out. As Dr. Lynne Coventry very cogently points out, "learning is both a cognitive (based on individual capacity and intelligence) and a social activity" (17). Simply memorising facts and figures cannot be called proper learning, because as a cognitive activity, 'learning' is incomplete unless the learner 'understands' the topic. But this cognitive activity is always situated in a social context. The nature of that context determines whether, and how well, that learning will be grasped by the individuals. In many circumstance individuals learn more effectively when they interact with other learners who are on similar perception levels regarding the task at hand; that is through co-operative or collaborative group activity. The use of technical innovations like shared teaching and video conferencing aims at making the 'cognition' or 'understanding' of the course materials easier, while making it a more 'social' activity, bringing together people from far-off locations on a common platform of learning.

Benefits of shared teaching and video conferencing:

'Team teaching', 'collaborative teaching', 'co-teaching; and 'shared teaching' are terms employed interchangeably to "a teaching model that involves two or more faculty members who collaborate on teaching materials, course activities, and student evaluations" (Zhang and Keim). Similarly, Robinson and Schaible have used the term 'collaborative teaching' to describe any academic experience in which two teachers work together in designing and teaching a course that itself uses group learning techniques (57). This "Shared Teaching", is an innovative way to balance teaching and research. As Rosemary Booth, Melody Dixon-Brown and Gary Kohut correctly point out, "shared teaching benefits students and teachers both. The students benefit by getting the perspective of two or more professors in one

class. And the professors also get more concentrated time for their research" (23). The 2010 report of the Blue Ribbon Panel of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) states that programmes centred on the practice of co-teaching holds "great promise for advancing shared responsibility for teacher preparation; supporting the development of complex teaching skills; and ensuring that all teachers will know how to work closely with colleagues, students, and community" (ii). It can thus be a crucial step towards empowering teachers to meet the challenges of 21st century classrooms.

Again, shared teaching, either when the teachers are present physically in the same classroom, or through video conferencing, open up the possibilities of collaboration exercises with remote classrooms. This benefits the students by providing access to experts on the subject-matter at hand, from all around the globe. With specific reference to English literature and language, the advantage of this becomes clear while teaching a theory like post colonialism, for example. Students in far flung areas of the globe can benefit from an expert person lecturing on this topic, through shared teaching. The main tutor could invite an expert or a resource person to share with him the class or through video conferencing. The benefit that the students gain from this action is to acquire the knowledge first hand from the main source. (This is exactly like a patient who consults a specialized physician.)

When two teachers deal with the same set of students together, they are able to control the situation better. Each tutor brings his/her individual skills and knowledge to the class, thus enriching the learning experience of the students. As Susan Mohrman, Susan Cohen and Allan Mohrman have correctly pointed out in *Designing team-based organizations: New forms for knowledge work*, teamwork presents personal challenges for individuals, including pressure to change and the adoption of new work practices. This is especially true in literature classes. Science and technology being more empirical disciplines, they involve the imparting of facts and figures. Teaching the humanities, teaching a literary text, is much more about different viewpoints. The same text can be seen as patriotic by one person, and violent or resistant by others. Having multiple teachers in the classroom helps to bring out these differing views, opens the space for healthy debate and discussion; and at the same teaches the students how different viewpoints can be equally true and valid. Thus, apart from helping in better understanding of the text itself, this kind of shared teaching can also prepare the students for their future life, where they will have to negotiate conflicts of opinion peacefully- both in their workplace and in their family life. As Marshall A. George and Patricia Davis-Wileyhave observed in 'Team Teaching a Graduate Course: Case Study', "although some students are not comfortable with two instructors and are concerned about possible differing evaluation criteria; most of them acknowledge team teaching as a worthwhile and unique experience" (75). At the same time, it benefits the teachers as well, because they have to learn to let go of their personal prejudices and fixed ideas, and accord respect to the colleague's opinion, even if it differs from his/her own- thus making them more liberal and accommodating. Peter T. Knight and Paul Trowler, again, are of the opinion that "Faculty who feel malaise or marginality may experience an increased capacity to take risks and to innovate in the classroom" (69-70), if they are brought

in contact with more energetic teachers through this shared teaching model, thus benefitting the students in the long run.

This researcher's own experience can be taken here as a case study to demonstrate the value of the technique of shared teaching. This happened as a collaboration work between the researcher and an English language expert Mr. Robert Sharples from Britain through the British Counsel. Teaching a reading course in one semester greatly benefitted the students and the tutors alike. The students got the opportunity to speak and interact with someone who speaks English as a first language; the pronunciations, the contexts of use became clearer to the students. And the presence of the native teacher facilitated their learning by translating difficult concepts into the mother language (here Arabic). This researcher felt that as the local teacher, he acted as a bridge between the British teacher and the Palestinian students. Also, the tutor himself learned new techniques and methods of teaching. The researcher's observation toward this experience is highly appreciative. As a result of this technique, the students interacted efficiently and their speaking skill improved much. Students were motivated to read literary texts such as short stories to further progress their reading skill.

Video conferencing, which takes the concept of shared teaching further, by bringing people from different countries and cultures face to face, also gives students more responsibility for their learning, where they improve their individual cognitive skills, even while learning the benefits of teamwork. And in the long run, this benefits conventional teaching. In the teaching of literature, the probability of getting the author himself/herself to interact with the students, either as a guest speaker physically present in the classroom, or through video conferencing; can add a very interesting dimension to the classes- making the story and its characters come alive for the students.

Again, unlike regular classes which cannot be preserved; Video sessions can be recorded for students to watch later. This can be of help if the students were absent or just want to go over the content later during study time. Video recording and sharing enables the students to relive the entire experience of the class in the comfort of their home, without having to depend on unreliable memory or faulty, incomplete notes. For Palestinian students learning a foreign language like English, this would be especially beneficial.

Limitations of these innovations:

However, while trying to incorporate these innovations to the classroom at his university, the researcher has found that, like all new things, these methods, too, have some problems during implementation.

Problems of using such innovations (and probable solutions):

Problem 1:

Video conferencing requires intense and constant concentration, and can cause fatigue. So, Time management is very important. Video conferencing should not be used to "cram all contact time into one session but should be spread throughout the duration of a course" (Coventry 34).

Solution:

- The first session should preferably be a short orientation session.

- Research shows that people cannot concentrate properly for more than 6-10 minutes at a time. Hence it is advisable not to talk at students for more than 10 minutes at a time. After such time allow for an activity or time for interaction.
- Scheduling a break, every half-hour or so, is recommended.
- It is advisable to keep each session duration limited to 60 minutes.

Problem 2:

Not so much when both teachers are present in the classroom, but there is a chance that the problem of Depersonalisation can occur in video conferencing classes. As there is no physical contact between the speaker and the listener sites, the learners might start viewing the instructor as an impersonal object on a screen. Building up student profiles –understanding their personalities and individual needs- is more difficult at a distance.

Solution:

- Tutors have to overcome this and build an environment of comfort and cooperation. They should endeavour to get to know students at the beginning; may be exchange photographs and some informal information at beginning/during induction. Using games or jokes to create diversion and an intimate environment is also recommended.
- Learning peoples' names, and addressing them directly (i.e. behaving as much as if both learner and tutor are physically present at the same site) can add a personal touch and help create a classroom like atmosphere. During each session a lot of opportunity to interact with others needs to be ensured, either at the site or across sites. Individual reports, team reports, presentations and feedback etc. are needed.

Problem 3:

Equipment can sometimes malfunction.

Solution:

- Avoid too many sites of interaction initially. One –on-one or two-to-one interactions are more effective.
- Check the equipment, monitor, microphone, internet connection etc. in advance, to see they are working properly.

Conclusion

While considering video conferencing as a solution to educational needs, one should understand the nature of the technology. As Dr. Coventry points out, "video conferencing has great potential for learning in Higher Education", and this potential lies in "creating greater opportunity for *dialogue* which facilitates more effective learning than *working alone*" (2). However, the success of video conferencing is dependent on several factors, and not all of them are matters of equipment or technology. These factors range from Institutional issues, to cost, to the attitude and adaptability of students and tutors to this relatively new method of teaching-learning. For instance, it is not feasible to think that a video conferencing system can be set up anywhere. This would be analogous to holding a telephone conversation at the same time when we are in a restaurant and someone is speaking to us in person, one party or the other is bound to feel unheard and neglected! The conference equipment should be based in a special room if possible. It can then be available for use whenever it is required rather than setting it up every

time it is requested. To maximise the chance of successful interaction the quality of the input must be maximised. Undoubtedly the most important issue for consideration is the 'content' of the video lecture; but if the student is uncomfortable, if there are technical problems like poor sound or image quality or inadequate lighting during the conference, then the learning process will be interfered with, even if the content being delivered by the instructor is extraordinary.

Video conferencing provides a means to get both students and tutors to a central location, even if virtually. The educational justification for 2-way video conferencing comes from "increasing teacher to student ratios by sharing teachers between sites, through reducing travel costs, and allowing greater access to quality teaching regardless of geographical location" (Coventry 28).

In summing up, one can say that while the traditional lecture and textual analysis method of teaching literature cannot be totally dispensed with, these new innovations can serve as important tools to improve the teaching-learning experience. It will improve "the teaching methods, communication skills, organisational and time management skills" (Coventry 29) etc. of the lecturers at the same time as it helps the students by getting exposed to new experiences, views, and cultures. The success of video conferencing ultimately lies inthe people communicating with each other, not the technology. And that ultimately is the purpose of education, especially the study of literature.

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