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The Leisure Of Learning: Students' Perceptions Of Learntertainment' As An Instructional Method

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ABSTRACT

With present-day classrooms becoming increasingly diverse, educational institutions, teachers and university administrators are looking to teaching and learning strategies that provide for a variety of learning profiles and styles. Many educators start their class with a 'big bang' - an interesting ice breaker- to raise excitement in their students, but due to the use of the lecture method, the interest in class soon regresses, and the attention of the learner begins to wane. This has the negative impact of affecting what is learned and the extent of knowledge gained as a result of the teaching-learning process. Consequently, learntertainment, a new teaching approach is being presented as an alternative to the lecture method. The purpose of this paper is identifying what the benefits of Learntertainment teaching strategies are and to explore students' perception of Learntertainment. A qualitative approach is considered to be appropriate for this paper and will be based on Strauss and Corbin (1998) grounded theory modified slightly to incorporate constructivist grounded theory espoused by Charmaz (2000).

Keywords: Learntertainment, alternative assessment, student learning assessment, assessment for learning, assessment of learning,

**“As long as there were people asking each other questions,
we have had constructivist classrooms. Constructivism, the study
of learning is about how we all make sense of our world,
and that reality hasn't changed.”**

- **Jacqueline Grennan Brooks (1999)**

INTRODUCTION

CONCEPT TO CLASSROOM INTERVIEW

With present-day classrooms becoming increasingly diverse, educational institutions, instructors, professors and university administrators are looking to teaching and learning strategies that provide for a variety of learning profiles and styles. Many educators start their class with a 'big bang' - an interesting ice breaker- to raise excitement in their students, but due to the use of the lecture method, the interest in class soon regresses, and the attention of the learner begins to wane. This has the negative impact of affecting what is learned and the extent of knowledge gained as a result of the teaching-learning process. Consequently, this calls for a change in the teaching learning process in many college classes.

There is a vital link between teaching, learning, and transformation of the teaching and learning process from one that is dreary, boring and teacher-centered to one that is fun, exciting and student-centered (Slater *et. al.*, 2004). Simeby (1996) reports on a study of university educators, found that whereas educators in different fields varied slightly in their delivery techniques, lecture mode of teaching was the most dominant method used in higher education institutions (HEIs). Other research has also shown that lecturing was the most widely used method by university educators in the United States, England and Scotland. Lecturers were used in science 91% of the time; and in the social sciences and humanities 81% and 61% respectively (Thielens, 1987).

The thrust for this research emerged from observation of a significant rise in faculty disinterest and the growing number of students' physically in classes but not psychosocially engaged - an indication of disinterest, and the impacts these apparent disassociations have had on students' motivation and academic performance. Currently, there is a need to transform teaching methods in many academic fields, including recreation, leisure, tourism and hospitality. The transformation of recreation, leisure, and tourism and hospitality education challenges educators to re-examine both their teaching styles and their assessment practices, if the new teaching-learning approaches are to succeed (Humphreys, Greenan & McIlveen, 1997).

Purpose Statement

While many believe alternative teaching strategies to be a compelling and effective means of promoting the use of higher order learning and create a more interactive teaching and learning experience, an alternative strategy such as learntertainment is lacking in empirical validation of its effectiveness. Currently, a great deal has been done with regards to theory on teaching and learning, with a decided gap in the literature regarding effectiveness of learntertainment strategy in teaching and learning strategies. Thus the purpose of this paper is to explore students' perceptions of the Learntertainment teaching strategy through focus group discussions and grounded theory. The specific objectives of the research are: (i) what is your perception of learntertainment instructional method? (ii) What aspect (s) of learntertainment would you say has helped you the most? (iii) How do you feel the learntertainment instructional method has benefited you?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Teaching: a new approach

The future of teaching, learning and assessment, calls for a new instructional approach that incorporates the demands of the new learning environments - environments that are judged in terms of its impact on learning; that focus on providing learners with activities for implementation and making meaning; Environments that are fun, facilitate critical thinking and problem solving innovative, provocative, flexible and use a variety of teaching strategy (Barr and Tagg 1995). This is very important in the light of the 21st century demand from legislators and parents and repeated calls from within colleges and universities that higher education institutions (HEIs): (i) promote the development of critical thinking and problem solving skills among students; (ii) open the curriculum to more than students' listening and regurgitating information; and (iii) analyze and evaluate student learning (Chickering, A.W, and Gamson, Z.F. 1987).

However, as will be explored in more detail in the literature review, very little attention has been paid to pedagogical techniques and their influence on how well students learn to apply concepts. As institutions of higher education engage in in-depth organizational examination, the teaching activities of the faculty are receiving increased attention. Scholars in the field of higher education underscore the importance of effective teaching and, facilitating student learning outcomes has become a major concern of university faculty and administrators. Highly esteemed scholars such as Ernest Boyer, Alexander Astin, and Sylvia Grider have highlighted in recent years, the need for instructional improvement in higher education (Kher, 1996). The focus on the student therefore is an important theme in instructional effectiveness (Armoo & Garrick, 2006; Kher 1996). In order to meet the goals researchers stress the importance of providing students with learning experiences that are exciting, authentic and practical; thus the call for learntertainment strategies.

Educators of institutions of higher learning will need to divert their focus and change their modus operandi so that students will learn the skills and competencies needed to succeed in today's workplace. Educators will also need to adopt instructional techniques that would help students develop critical thinking and problem solving skills and the ability to work collaboratively with others. Subsequently, a re-examination of the curriculum will require change management. Developments facing colleges and universities in the near future will entail change in teaching and assessment and require flexibility from both staff and students. Student demographics are changing quite drastically; and thus the traditional learning environment will need to adapt to a more facilitating learning environment. Academics who are practitioners of teaching using the traditional method will need to adjust to be able to teach within a learntertainment classroom. The transformation of tourism, hospitality, recreation and leisure education demands that educators re-examine their teaching styles, if the new teaching-learning approaches are to be effective.

The review of literature suggests effectiveness of alternate teaching strategies that address the issues of social cohesion, motivational and cognitive development perspective that students attain throughout their learning process (Killen 2006). With regards to the social cohesion perspective, students enjoy a more positive climate, embrace greater collaboration, enhanced and greater team building compared to the traditional lecture method. In terms of cognitive development perspectives, these strategies provide students with scaffolding for thinking and thus gain new insights into knowledge, experience ease of understanding and are able to apply knowledge in a practical sense (Vygotsky 1978). The scaffolds facilitate students' ability to build on prior knowledge and internalize new information. The motivational perspective focuses on group encouragement which helps not only

the individual student but the group as a whole to gain an increased learning and enhanced achievement outcomes. This is designed to lead to positive reactions and students feel more relaxed. Accordingly, the actions which instructors/professors develop for their students engage the mind as well as the hand.

It has been argued that the lecture approach is archaic and ineffective in the context of the technologically driven institutions of today that utilize various SMART technologies to provide fast-paced delivery and exchange of new information. This suggests that the ideal role of professors/instructors as facilitators, serving as catalysts, not experts, on various issues and subjects discussed and disseminated in an attempt to address a student's quest for knowledge and skills. In contrast, Vygotsky's proposed approach to teaching promotes learning contexts in which students play an active role in learning. Roles of instructors/professors and students are therefore shifted, as instructors/professors should collaborate with their students in order to help facilitate meaning construction in students. Learning therefore becomes a reciprocal experience for the students and professor. Thus if teaching resources involve students and lead them to be successful in their endeavors, they are more likely to enjoy their tasks and want to become even more involved (Ebert-May, Brewer & Sylvester, 1997).

Light and Cox (2001) in contrast, focused their discussion on the relationship between learning and teaching within higher education. They examine elements which challenge the quality of learning students experience, including: rising enrollments, diversity, demands for professionalism, lagging resources, and calls for relevance and adaptability. Consequently, they propose the theory of the "reflective professional," the educator who seeks to become knowledgeable of the changing roles and trends within the college setting. Accordingly, Light and Cox (2001) suggest three primary areas of concern for the "reflective professional include: a critical conceptual framework, relevant genres, and strategies for professional growth and as such, they suggest instructors need for ongoing reflection and change. In support of this shift, Huba and Freed, (2001) seeks to provide a "blueprint" for instructors wishing to shift their focus to learner-centered teaching. Similarly, Weimer (2002) proposes the idea that moving to a learner-centered approach is an extension of the "product quality" trend. He focuses on learners (students) by calling for instructional policies/practices that directly impact how much and how well students learn. He points out that elements which affect learning includes the balance of power within the classroom, the function of content, the role of the teacher, responsibilities for learning, and implementation (resistance) issues.

Looking at these studies as a whole, one can deduce that by limiting or reducing these elements as well as reducing the time those students spend reading textbooks and taking lecture notes, instructors can instead increase the amount of time that students spend in actively participating in the learning process. Thus information can be better passed along and retained for longer periods

Active Learning

Learning strategies that are based on a single sensory input, such as reading, can be significantly less effective than learning strategies that require multiple sensory inputs and facilitates active learning. Meyers and Jones (1993), in defining active learning, state that it "involves providing opportunities for students to meaningfully talk and listen, write, read, and reflect on the content, ideas, issues, and concerns of an academic subject" (p. 6). Therefore an active learning environment is one where students do more than simply listen to lecturers. Students are doing something including discovering, processing, and applying information and not merely acting as sponges -- all of which require students to apply what they are learning (p. xi). For many instructors/professors, the focus is on course coverage -- the target 'coverage of all the material'. This approach may not be an efficient

strategy. In a research done by Meyers and Jones (1993), the following statistics were reported:

- Students are not attentive to what is being said in a lecture 40% of the time.
- Students retain 70% of the information in the first ten minutes of a lecture but only 20% in the last ten **minutes**.
- Four months after taking an introductory psychology course, students know only 8% more than students who had never taken the course.

In addition, research also shows that learning is enhanced when students become actively involved in the learning process. Notwithstanding that, there are times when lecturing is the most appropriate method for disseminating information, current thinking in college teaching and learning suggests that the use of a variety of instructional strategies can positively enhance student learning. However, active learning shifts the focus from the instructor/professor and delivery of course content to the student and active engagement with the material. Through active learning techniques and modeling by the instructor/professor, students shed the traditional role as passive receptors and learn and practice how to capture knowledge and skills and use them meaningfully.

Learntertainment

Learntertainment proposes a rethinking of the current instructional strategies, inviting participants within the learning context to incorporate fun into the teaching and learning and become engaged in the process, so that all students will benefit. Thus, the role of the educator within this paradigm is to facilitate the learning experience of students and to create a stimulating learning environment. It is suggested that educators take advantage of 'Learntertainment' techniques to move classes beyond the initial fun ice breaker. Like the Native American saying - "*Tell me and I'll forget. Show me and I may not remember. Involve me and I'll understand*". The last five words of the quote is the essence of learntertainment teaching strategy. This strategy is believed to aid facilitators in optimizing the learning experiences for their students.

Findings from research on students' learning indicate that pedagogical techniques influence how well students learn to apply concepts (Michlitsch & Sidle, 2002). It has been argued that to meet the goals, educators need to strive to provide students with learning experiences that are exciting, authentic and practical; thus the call for 'Learntertainment'. 'Learntertainment', according to Armoo and Garrick (2006;2), involves "the process of weaving and implementing elements of fun and entertainment into every learning experience, thereby ensuring that learning comes to life for everyone involved in the teaching-learning process". It involves making every learning experience interactive, practical, and entertaining, while not slacking on the educational aspect. Therefore, 'Learntertainment' is posited to be fun for both the students and faculty (Armoo & Garrick, 2006).

Through 'Learntertainment', both students and faculty aims to create an exciting and interesting situation that makes learning and knowledge transfer a powerful, exciting and emotion-filled experience. It involves creating and managing meaningful learning experiences and stimulating students' learning through fun and entertaining activities with the educator taking the learning styles of students into consideration, and capitalizes on their strengths. Additionally, it involves making every learning experience practical, educational and entertaining, through the uses of the forces of education such as assessment designers, collective assessment and participatory pedagogy. 'Learntertainment takes advantage of sophisticated entertainment, which encompasses entertainment specific to millennials and the emotions of students and faculty to seek to create an astonishing and interesting learning situation. It is consistent with the contention that educators need to view teaching-learning

exercises as a process of developing and enhancing students' ability to learn, and that the educator's role is not merely to transmit information, but rather to facilitate learning.

Learntertainment can also be described as “active learning” in that it focuses on learning *processes* rather than on learning *products*. Active learning redefines classroom practice from a static view of teaching in which knowledge is poured into the passive, empty minds of students (receptacles) by lecturers (repository of all knowledge) to a more dynamic view where, through project-based, collaborative, and problem-based activities and assessments, students play a more vital role in creating new knowledge to be applied to other professional and academic contexts. In the traditional view of education, according to Freire, students are not empowered to think critically or develop ideas. He posits that teachers discuss reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable. Thus, the teacher's task he says is to “fill” the students with the contents of the commentary (cited in *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, translated by Myra Bergman Ramos 1987).

A proponent of active learning, Brazilian educator Paulo Freire referred to traditional education as “banking education” a model in which teachers deposit knowledge into students' minds for students to ‘spew out’ at assessment in the same way that money is deposited into a bank account. The learntertainment strategy, in contrast, could play an important role in ensuring that learning is the result of dialogue and production of new knowledge in a format that is engaging, fun and is co constructed within the classroom, making both course content and student work more relevant.

Learntertainment strategies encourage assessment throughout the course rather than at the end and recognize the importance of collaboration, in which faculty and students work together and think critically again focusing on processes and not just on grades. Consequently, this teaching-learning process involves creating and managing meaningful learning experiences and stimulating students' learning through fun and entertaining activities. ‘Learntertainment’ uses a variety of teaching methods including: class/group discussions, role-play, think-outside-the-box exercises, puzzles and games. In selecting a technique, the educator takes the learning styles of students into consideration, and capitalizes on their strengths.

METHODOLOGY

Given the explorative nature of this study, a qualitative approach is considered to be appropriate. The qualitative research approach will be based on Strauss and Corbin (1998) grounded theory and will be modified slightly to incorporate constructivist grounded theory espoused by Charmaz (2000) because the researcher is positioned within the phenomenon as one of the co-creators and facilitator of the learntertainment teaching strategy. Grounded theory, according to Creswell (2009) is an emergent design which allows for the examination of existing theories, ongoing data analysis, and the use of verbal and visual data. Qualitative approach is a way to gain insights through discovering meanings by improving ones understanding holistically. In analyzing qualitative data, one seeks to explore the richness, depth, and complexity of phenomena. Qualitative research can tap into the students' psyche to give a depth of understanding that is the key for ongoing educational development approaches. This type of research explores the richness, depth, and complexity of phenomena. Qualitative research, broadly defined, means "any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990 p.17).

This research will focus of learntertainment taught students from a College in Jamaica and two Universities in the U.S.A. and one in Canada. Data will be collected via focus group discussions with four groups of key informants –Tourism, Hospitality, Research and Leisure students. Focus groups

provide an excellent opportunity to listen to the voices of students, explore issues in depth, and obtain insights that might not occur without the discussion they provide (Palomba & Banta, 1999, p.196). As Patton (2002) notes, focus groups as a research method involves group interviewing in which there is interaction between the researcher and the group as well as interaction between the group members on a specific topic. Groups according to Patton (2002) are typically made up of 6-10 persons and usually homogenous in nature.

The sample will consist four groups of students ($N = 40$) taught and assessed using learntertainment strategies and classified as full students time during the fall 2006 to 2009 and spring 2010 semesters. The sample selection for this study will be a convenient sample from which a random iteration will be done to produce the selection of 40 students (10 per group). Due to time constraint, a convenient sample will be used because data can be gathered in a short period of time from individuals that are available rather than selecting from the entire population.

EXPECTED RESULTS

It is expected that 'learntertainment' will foster in students a deeper understanding of the material taught and in place of memorization, abstraction, remoteness, and isolation, the techniques used will offers meaningfulness, connection, interest, fun and purpose. As such, it is anticipated that students will more likely be able to access their own prior knowledge, (which is a key to learning) think critically and find personally meaningful problem solutions or interpretations. Thus, based on the research, recommendations could be made to include the utilization of Learntertainment as a teaching strategy.

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