Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 46 (2012) 4817 – 4821

WCES 2012

Best practices of teaching in higher education in united states: a case study

Chan Yuen Fooka*

aFaculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 40200 Shah Alam, Malaysia

Abstract

This study is an attempt to assess the level as well as factors associated with teaching practices among students and instructors in a higher learning institute in the United States. The sample population comprised 181 undergraduate and postgraduate students and 22 instructors from the School of Education. Questionnaires using a 6 point Likert-scale were administered to all 203 respondents whilst interviews were conducted with 5 undergraduates, postgraduates and instructors. In addition, document analysis was also conducted on the syllabus used for the 12 courses. Descriptive analysis indicated that most of the teaching practices (dimensions or overall) recorded above moderate level in higher education. Inferential statistical analysis indicated that many of the sub-variables seemed to have moderate influences on the dimensions of teaching practices. Results of independent-samples t-tests, indicated that gender did not have any influence on the perception of teaching practices. Generally, students’ preference for feedback and active learning coincided with the concept of transformative learning. This should augur well especially in laying the foundations for more specific actions to further improve teaching practices in higher education in the United States as well as other universities which aspire to become research universities.

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Keywords: Teaching, best practices, higher education, United States;

1. Introduction

In the current global wave of higher education transformational change, many institutions of higher education have been called upon to revisit their purpose of teaching, learning and assessment. This is in line with equipping learners with skills and competencies needed to succeed in their future workplace. According to Brown (2008), teaching involves many processes namely curriculum, subject matter and epistemology, teaching and learning, and assessment-evaluation. The nature of what is taught, how that content is taught and learned, and how that teaching and/or learning is assessed and evaluated are core processes in education and schooling. However, in most western systems the status of research has traditionally been greater than teaching and learning (D’Andrea & Gosling, 2005:146). The three ‘Rs’ – resources, rewards and recognition – are in abundance for research, whereas the opposite has been true for teaching and learning and assessment. Increasingly, universities are being required to pay greater attention to improving teaching and enhancing student learning. Hence, Kreber (2000) pointed out that the present culture of higher education ostensibly values the integration of faculty roles, particularly of teaching and

* Chan Yuen Fook. Tel.: +603-55227084
E-mail address: yuenfookchan@yahoo.com

1877-0428 © 2012 Published by Elsevier Ltd. Selection and/or peer review under responsibility of Prof. Dr. Hüseyin Uzunboylu
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research. Improving teaching and learning involves careful evaluation of the teaching, learning and assessment approaches and strategies that have been chosen to effect change in higher education.

2. Literature review

Teaching involves changing the beliefs and habits of a learner or a student (Light, Cox, & Calkins, 2009) by encouraging the student to learn some content for a certain purpose. In lieu with this, Green (1971) identified three major approaches to teaching. The first one is teacher-centered/content-oriented teaching which he refers to as training or instructing-of content (i.e. knowledge or information). The second approach refers to student-centered/learning-oriented. This generally entails educating, cultivating or guiding a student. The third approach is bridging the student and teacher interaction which is common in an apprentice-master or doctoral candidate-supervisor relationship. In most cases neither of these key goals is well defined: what is excellent teaching and what constitutes a high quality learning environment? The manner in which institutions are attempting to achieve these goals is many and varied (D’Andrea & Gosling, 2005:1). Attempts to turn the rhetoric into reality are seen as improvements to the teaching and learning process in higher education. Many of the goals that are seen as ends, as improvements in teaching and learning, are only means to a higher-level goal. Hence, it is undeniably true that every higher education institution wants to boast that it offers ‘high quality learning and teaching’. Mission statements consistently claim that universities and colleges seek to provide excellent teaching and a high quality learning environment. However, it is less than obvious that institutions are either clear about what these goals mean or actually pursuing these goals with strategic vision. A study to look into the best practices of teaching in higher education is timely indeed.

3. The study

This study employed a descriptive method which centres on exploring the phenomenon of teaching practices in higher education. Two groups of respondents provided data for the actual study. The first group comprised undergraduate and postgraduate students whilst the second group comprised the instructors from a school of education in United States. A total of 181 students and 22 instructors were randomly selected to form the study sample. Two sets of research questionnaires were used, one set for the instructor and the other for the student respondents. Besides that 5 instructors and 5 students were interviewed to gain their feedback regarding with teaching practices in higher education. Descriptive and inferential statistical analysis procedures (or techniques) were used to answer the research questions.

4. Results and discussions

The results in Table 1 show that for the composite construct of Teaching Practices (TP), a majority of respondents (81.8%) reported a moderate to high level score (overall scores 3.00 or higher). In fact, only thirty-three of the respondents (18.2%) reported a ‘Low’ level with a total composite Teaching Practices (TP) score of less than 3.00 on a 0.00 to 5.00 scale-range. The range of total scores was large, the maximum score being 5.00 and the minimum total score 1.00. The small standard deviation observed indicates that most of the scores centred on the mean value. The mean value for the total score of TP Overall was 3.97. This seems to signal that overall the respondents consented to the above moderate level of teaching practices among instructors in the university (Table 1).
Table 1. Levels of Teaching Practices Overall (n=203)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score on Teaching Practices Overall</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low (less than 3.00)</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>18.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate (3.00 - 4.00)</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>59.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High (more than 4.00)</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>22.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>203</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mean : 3.97  
Min. : 1.00  
SD : .82  
Max: 5.00

With regards to Teaching Practices (TP), data in Table 2 shows that respondents agreed that instructors demonstrated a high level of Teaching Practices in four important aspects in higher education namely establishing explicit concern and support for individual development (M=4.16, SD=.952), a vibrant and embracing social context (M=4.15, SD=.934), an atmosphere of intellectual excitement (M=4.14, SD=.967), and an adaptive curriculum (M=4.04, SD=1.006). However, the other six aspects of teaching practices were reported at a above moderate level. These six aspects were established in an intensive research and knowledge transfer culture, an internationally and culturally diverse learning environment, a clear expectations and standards, a learning cycle of experimentation, and assessment, intensive research culture, premium quality learning spaces, resources and technologies, and a scholastic inquiry learning platform. However, from the interviews conducted with students and instructors, there were still some drawbacks identified in teaching. It has been identified that three instructors would need guidance to enhance their pedagogical knowledge in the classroom.

Table 2. Teaching Practices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My instructor establishes</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>explicit concern and support for individual development</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>.952</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a vibrant and embracing social context</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>.934</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>an atmosphere of intellectual excitement</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>.967</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>an adaptive curriculum</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>1.006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>clear academic expectations and standards</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td>1.095</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a scholastic inquiry learning platform</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>1.067</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>an international and culturally diverse learning environment</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>1.151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>learning cycles of experimentation, feedback and assessment</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>1.166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>premium quality learning spaces, resources and technologies</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>1.149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>an intensive research and knowledge transfer culture permeating all teaching and learning activities</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>1.066</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Besides that, an independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the Teaching Practices (TP) scores for male and female students. There was no significant difference in scores for males (M = 3.94, SD = .846), and females [M = 3.98, SD = .854; t (179) = -.336, p = .737]. Furthermore, the program of study in ANOVA analysis (F=2.293, p>.104) also did not make any significant differences in the means scores of Teaching Practices by bachelors degree (M = 4.19, SD = .621), masters degree (M = 3.99, SD = .549) and doctoral degrees (M = 4.09, SD = .668) students in higher education. Based on the interview data with students, their instructors were adopting the student-focused conceptions in most of their classes. Normally, the instructor will teach for an hour or less, then followed by small group discussion and presentation, and ended the class with reflection to allow students participation in the class. The interview data also indicated that the consultation with postgraduate students was normally conducted based on the learning-focused approach as proposed by Light, Cox, & Calkins (2009).

Generally, the descriptive analysis indicated that most of the teaching practices (dimensions or overall) were all at the above moderate level in higher education. Inferential statistical analysis results indicated that many of the sub-variables in the study seemed to have moderate influences on the dimensions of teaching practices in higher education. The results of the independent-samples t-tests, and one analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicated that
gender and program of study did not have any influence on the perception of the teaching practices in higher education.

Kreber’s work (2001:15) highlighted that “those who practice the scholarship of teaching carefully design ways to examine, interpret, and share learning about teaching. In this study, instructors were concerned with individual student development, learning context, learning atmosphere, curriculum, and had clear expectations and standards on students’ achievement. McKinney (2007:9) whilst speaking on scholarship of teaching and learning stressed that though good teaching had been defined and operationalized in many ways (e.g. student satisfaction ratings, peer observation judgments, self-reflective portfolios), however, good teaching will definitely promote student learning and other desired student outcomes. With the implementation of these best practices, good teaching will support department, college, and institutional missions and objectives. The findings also indicated that instructors were concerned for a scholastic inquiry learning platform. This finding was further confirmed in the survey where students pointed out that their instructors always urged them to self-reflect on their work. Besides that, students also realised that they had the responsibility to be reflective, creative, open-minded and receptive to new ideas. Generally, scholarly teaching is closely linked to reflective practice (Brookfield, 1995). This conception of scholarly teaching is related to what Boyer (1990) labelled the scholarship of teaching. Even though most of the instructors demonstrated high content knowledge in their classes, however, interviews with students revealed that there was still a lack of pedagogical knowledge identified among a few instructors. As stated by Light, Cox, & Calkins (2009), the problem in teaching practices is not only the approach adopted, however, the quality of the lectures or activities conducted also makes a difference.

5. Implication and conclusion

Students in the School of Education in this study indicated that the levels of teaching practices in the university studied was at a high level. As regards to the findings of no significant differences between gender in terms of teaching practices indicated that there is no special preference based on gender. The one way analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicated there is a synonymous need for high quality teaching practices among bachelors’ degree, masters’ degree and doctoral degree students. A clearer guideline for instructors and students will ensure a better understanding of the role of all parties in the teaching and learning cycle. Such enforcement of the monitoring of the teaching practices could possibly have very pertinent impacts on the learning in higher education. Students also felt that to become an active learner needed a lot of hard work and preparation. Students needed to complete their homework before they attended class. In order to be able to participate actively in the classroom discussions, students needed to read up all the assigned reading materials. When asked the best strategies to enhance active learning in higher education, respondents suggested a few practical strategies such as small group discussion, classroom activities, small assignments and feedback to be used more regularly in the classroom. These findings indicated that teaching and learning practices should be more formative in nature to trigger better active learning in higher education. To recapitulate, this study, through its findings has succeeded in contributing to the literature on teaching and learning practices in several ways. First, the concept of teaching practices adopted in the study indicated that the instructor should demonstrate an explicit concern and support for individual development. The teaching practices in higher education should inculcate an atmosphere of intellectual discourse in the classroom. Second, the high level of learning obligation implies that student engagement is important in the teaching and learning in higher education. Students should be motivated to excel in their study and be responsible to search for new knowledge, respect the viewpoints of others and also be receptive to new ideas. It is important for all undergraduates and postgraduates to be self-motivated and to be autonomous learners. It is crucial and critical for a university student to think creatively, critically and independently. Third, there were indications that students need to reflect on their own work and adopt higher order thinking skills in their learning. The finding also implies that assessment in higher education should be formative in nature and should do away with final exams. In order to further enhance active learning in the higher learning institutes, instructor/s should be more concerned with providing timely feedback. Finally, the study helps to compile evidence to refine the concept of teaching and
learning practices in higher education and has successfully added valuable empirical data in further understanding teaching and learning practices from a model university in the United States.

Acknowledgements

This paper was part of a research funded by the Malaysian-American Commission on Educational Exchange (MACEE) and Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Malaysia.

References