Methods for Maximizing Graduate Students' Learning Experience: An Insider's Perspective

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Abstract

Graduate students furthering their studies at Master level are mature adult learners who bring with them a myriad of educational backgrounds and professional experiences into their studies. Delivering knowledge and information to them the traditional way via the lecture method per se may not be very effective anymore. They need methods that can utilize and make relevant their existing knowledge and professional experiences to help them realize their full potentials. This paper discusses the incorporation of four methods (individual presentation, dialogue, article critiquing and forum) into a graduate-level course (ESL Methodology) to supplement the lecture method, to provide variation in methods of teaching graduate students and as alternative measures for these graduate students to maximize their learning experience.

Keywords: learning experience, professional experience, graduate students, individual presentation, dialogue, article critiquing, forum

1. Introduction

People who have had tertiary education are considered to be knowledgeable and better able citizens who can contribute more positively to their country, nation and society. Universities as the service providers for these graduates are expected to produce wholesome, versatile well-balanced individuals who are capable of making informed decisions, resilient in facing adversities and always ready to take up whatever challenges that come their way. Society also expects that their stint at the university would have made these graduates better prepared mentally, emotionally and psychologically for their profession, and the knowledge gained would help them to be scholars with integrity and humanized them more, in their interaction with others in society.

This paper is based on an action research conducted by the researcher with a cohort of graduate students undertaking an ESL (English as a Second Language) Methodology course, a compulsory course for the Master of Education TESL (Teaching of English as a Second Language) Programme at the Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). As some data for the study is yet to be fully analyzed, the issue of methods for maximizing graduate students' learning experience in taking the course is discussed in this paper only at conceptual level.

2. The Cohort

More and more people are furthering their studies at advanced level at universities. Many ESL teachers, college and university lecturers, and teacher aspirants are furthering their studies at Master level at the Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) soon or a few years after completing their first degree.

At a glance, these graduate students seem to have these attributes: they are adult learners who are intelligent, very pro-active, enthusiastic and highly motivated. They are different in terms of age, teaching experience and levels of teaching. To elaborate, their age ranged from 25 to 40+ years old. All of them are in the teaching profession at various levels: primary, secondary, college and tertiary; at public or private institutions. Their teaching experience also varied from merely three months (as a temporary teacher) to clocking in twenty-odd years. They are also furthering their studies for a variety of reasons: ranging from the perennial students as epitomized by the senior teachers who are seeking knowledge for knowledge's sake; to the younger teachers who are pursuing the degree for utilitarian purposes such as to upgrade their current knowledge and skills to keep pace with current trends in education in order to remain relevant in the discipline. These graduate ESL students bring with them a myriad of experiences, diverse expectations and learning styles; and a variety of purposes for engaging in learning again (Richards, 2001; Orel, 2011) to the graduate classroom. However, they have a common goal that is, to get the Master of Education degree. Their demographic diversity as delineated here will make teaching them to be a very challenging task.

3. Aspiration for the Course

The researcher is aware that she is not teaching an ordinary cohort. The stringent entry qualifications into a research university like UPM means that they are selected students. As such, the researcher would like to figure out the best

way to teach this cohort in the Course, to enable them to really enhance their knowledge, to help them derive the maximum benefit from the Course.

The researcher wishes to utilize their existing knowledge about teaching in ESL context, for them to share their diverse experiences and knowledge with their course-mates, and to reduce if not to eliminate, the selfish desire **not** to share (for fear that others would perform better based on the shared information). In other words, the researcher would like to provide a wholesome course of study. In undertaking this course, these graduate students gain not only content knowledge but also interpersonal skills, spirit of sharing and contributing to others.

To achieve this, the researcher conducted an informal 'Needs Analysis' with these graduate students at the beginning of the semester, when they registered for the Course, to determine their existing knowledge on methods of teaching in ESL, and current issues in education related to English language teaching; and their learning styles and preferences.

One of the grouses of studying at Master's level is that it can get to be very demanding for these graduate students. They may learn that the skills they applied during their previous studies may not be really relevant or stand them in good stead in their current learning context. Therefore, it is a pre-requisite for these students to unlearn (old methods) and to embrace the new ones (Ornstein, 1990; Woodward, 1996; Joyce, Weil and Calhoun, 2009). Methods of teaching have a very crucial role in the teacher-learner relationship, direction of teaching-learning process and classroom interaction (Lasley and Matscynski, 1997; Kincheloe, Slattery and Steinberg, 2000; Good and Brophy, 2003) which cannot be substituted by modern technologies. Ultimately, the method(s) selected can make or break the teaching –learning context.

The researcher's reservation about using lecture (per se) as a method of teaching these graduate students stems from her knowledge that although they all are selected students, some of them are introverted and have 'stage-fright' when asked to speak in public. Furthermore, many of them are studying on part-time basis and have to travel quite far to come for their study. Overworked students like them would be dozing off in the air-conditioned lecture room during the researcher's lecture(s). Ironically too, the modern gadgets and technology which should have made learning to be more student-friendly via the use of LMS (Learning Management System), copying notes from lecturers' pen-drives, surfing information from the internet, texting on sophisticated mobile phones; could make them become very self-sufficient (a.k.a. self-centred), living in their own world and not really needing others. Inter-personal skills, esprit de corps and bonding among friends are absent from such a class; which definitely is going to have detrimental effects on their studies.

Based on the data gleaned from the 'Needs Analysis' and her observation as mentioned earlier/above, the researcher believes that teaching them through the lecture method per se would not be sufficient to tap on these graduate students' knowledge, experience and potentials; to reduce their anxiety level **(**Krashen, 1985) and to build their inter-personal skills. In fact, using the lecture method per se with this cohort would be tantamount to insulting their intelligence by not giving them the opportunity to experience the learning they deserve and thus possibly denying them the awareness that the 'learning' should come from they themselves. In short, relying on the lecture method in teaching this cohort would not make them be 'engaged' in the learning process.

Furthermore, the move from teacher-centred to student-centred learning (SCL, 2011) means that the lecturer is no longer dictating the teaching learning process. Instead, these graduate students are expected to take centre-stage in their learning with the lecturer relegated to the role of a facilitator (Gibb, 1992; Woodward, 1996; Senior, 2009a; Good and Brophy, 2003).

However, the lecture method with all its shortcomings does have a place in the Course. What the researcher would like to do in the Course is to supplement the lecture method with four other methods deemed necessary to bring about the best in these graduate students' learning experience, to enhance their intellect, creativity and multi-levels communication skills. These four methods are 1) individual presentation, 2) spontaneous dialogue, 3) article critiquing (group work), and 4) forum (group presentation).

4. The Four Methods

4.1 Individual presentation

Since this is a methodology course and all of them are teachers at various levels over a number of years, the researcher would like to gauge their perception of themselves as teachers, and their perception of their profession (teaching). In this activity, each student is requested to choose a symbol to represent his/her metaphor of *self* as a teacher; and another symbol to represent his/her metaphor of the teaching profession, and rationalize their selection of each symbol/metaphor. All these graduate students have to present the first part of the activity (metaphor of self as a teacher) before moving on to presenting the second part (their metaphors of the teaching profession). They are encouraged to be as succinct as possible and to do each presentation within three to five minutes.

4.2 Dialogue

A wide range of topics related to current issues in education will be written on sentence strips and placed in a small box. These graduate students will work in pairs in this activity. Each pair will pick up a topic from the box, discuss the topic for one minute, and then 'converse' on the topic spontaneously for about five minutes. As such, the exchanges between the interlocutors are not prepared earlier, as is the norm. Instead, the exchange posed by an interlocutor will be based on the response given by the other interlocutor. Therefore, the challenge is for both interlocutors to ensure that the flow of the discourse is still within the framework of the topic. Moreover, apart from the interlocutors need to

have background knowledge on the issues discussed, the rapport between the interlocutors would help them to converse animatedly, showcasing their interpersonal skills and ability to 'think on their feet'.

4.3 Article critiquing

These graduate students have to work in groups of four in this activity. Each group has to choose and critique a research-based or teaching-based article on education published in established journals. The assumption is that articles published in such journals would be authored by distinguished writers or scholars. These graduate students may feel awestruck by the writer's prominence which may hinder them from being objective in their critiquing, the reason they should work in groups in doing this task.

This activity will train these students to be critical in their thinking, and in discerning the validity of the ideas presented in the text, against their own value system, and 'critiquing' (not criticizing) the ideas presented in the text intelligently based on valid information. Moreover, the ability to critique ideas and looking at an issue from various perspectives could prevent them from (albeit inadvertently) plagiarizing other scholars' ideas, at the same time showcasing their scholarliness.

4.4 Forum

A forum is an ideal platform for training these graduate students in thinking out of the box and honing their communication skills, at the same time very much practicing the principles underpinning the student-centred learning context (SCL, 2011). A forum consists of a panel of three or four people who will take different roles during the presentation such as the Minister of Education, State Director of Education, representative of PTA (Parents-Teachers Association) or a Senior Assistant; and a Moderator; or any other roles appropriate to the topic.

Since they are all involved in teaching, they are required to discuss current issues in education, especially those related directly to English language teaching e.g. hiring of ETAs (English Teaching Assistants) from the States (USA) to teach English in national (public) schools in Malaysia; violence in schools; teachers' safety against gangster students, the new Malaysia National Education Blueprint, the implementation of the School-Based Assessment to replace the PMR (Lower Secondary Assessment Examination) etc.

During the forum, the panel will present various perspectives on the topic discussed i.e. the pros and cons, which will make this activity to be a very stimulating learning experience for all the parties involved. Additionally, the moderator has a very crucial role to play in determining the smooth flow of the forum. The moderator has to link ideas from one presenter/panel member to the others, and then synthesize and conclude for the whole forum. The moderator has to be very alert to be able to do this. Thus, the moderator's job is not just to call out the names of the panel members and invite them into the discussion but also to *gel* the ideas as well.

5. Discussion

The four methods (individual presentation, dialogue, article critiquing and forum) would provide these graduate students with a variety of learning experience. In the individual presentations on the metaphor of 'self' as a teacher and the metaphor of teaching, these graduate students are expected to become more aware of the crucial role they play in building the nation. The dialogue would reveal to these graduate students the importance of turn-takings in order not to dominate the conversation; and to do the dialogue strictly on the topic given, within the time allocated. In critiquing articles by prominent scholars, these graduate students have to overcome their feeling of awe towards these scholars to enable them to scrutinize these scholars' works objectively. The challenges in doing a forum presentation are on how to use diplomacy in rejecting an idea or in improving a member's ideas without causing offense, and to deliver the forum professionally.

The four methods delineated in this paper incorporate a problem-based approach to learning and indicate that SCL (Student Centred Learning) has taken place. SCL can be discerned when students are 'actively involved in learning, whereby the emphasis is on the process and competence over content. These graduate students are guided to make informed decisions, be more responsible for their own learning, and to be more resourceful in applying their previous experience' (SCL, 2011: 5) and relating the learning to their lives. In all the four methods too, the lecturer acts as a facilitator with much reduced TTT (Teacher Talking Time) and the graduate students have more STT (Student Talking Time) to hone their new found skills (Doran, 2009; Senior, 2009b). The dialogue, article critiquing and Forum would prepare these graduate students for 'real world communication' (Bress, 2010). The four methods hopefully will provide them with 'hands-on' experience, making them versatile individuals, their study is relevant to them and they are learning in context.

6. Conclusion

As this research on the issue (methods to maximize graduate students' learning experience) is not completed yet, the discussion is really based on the projection of the expected outcomes. Preliminary findings indicate that the results would be positive. Admittedly, the four methods discussed in this paper are not entirely new, but they have been neglected, in favour of the easier to implement lecture method. However, the researcher is hypothesizing that incorporating these four methods into the ESL methodology course would enable the graduate students undertaking the Course to experience an alternative way to learning; boost their self-respect, self-esteem and inter-personal skills, and take away the tedium of learning. If these graduate students would have been experiencing all this in the Course through being actively involved in the four methods, the researcher believes that she has achieved her aspiration to help these graduate students attain the maximum learning experience in the Course.

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