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Lesson plans as a tool to facilitate student-centred learning in discussion class activities: Student perceptions and teacher observations

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Abstract

Lesson plans are useful for planning effectiveness in facilitating student-centred learning. Usually, teachers give less attention to lesson plans when designing activities for discussion or tutorial classes. This study examines how the use of lesson plans can support student-centred learning in tutorial classes and thereby enhance teaching and learning effectiveness. The study population of this study was 45 first year students who followed a second semester 'Introduction to Data Analysis' course unit. Lesson plans with in-class activities were designed based on experiential learning (Kolb 1984) to include Teaching Learning Activities (TLAs). The outcomes of the lesson plan and in-class learning activities were analysed by using student-feedback and in-class observations during the planned activity. According to the designed lesson plan, the discussion class was divided into several groups and given the reading materials related to the lesson. The students were guided to read those materials and present them as small group presentations. In a student-centred discussion, the students themselves formulate and direct the discussion. One student serves as the facilitator of the discussion, but the discussion flows from student to student. Student perceptions based on feedback revealed that the planned tutorial activities helped students to develop more knowledge on the subject. In discussions, more than 80 % of students were observed participating actively. 65 % of students had recognized that they need to improve skills in time management, facilitating metacognition. More than 85 % of students stated that this activity encouraged them to read English articles and improve their knowledge as well. The findings suggest that lesson plans can be recommended as a tool to improve student-centred learning as well as develop teacher self-confidence and time management. When tutorial classes use lesson plans in this way to engage students in planned TLAs in class, students develop better learning.

Background

Undergraduate education should basically be based on student centred education. As a result of that an academic course is developed successfully based on clear statements of what can be achieved at the end of the course which are called the Learning Outcomes. Learning Outcomes are one of the guiding tools that help to have a conception about what can be achieved by following a particular course unit. Learning Outcomes also help the lecturer to design the path to be followed when making a lesson plan for their lessons. Making a lesson plan by using learning outcomes also enable to manage lecture time properly. Especially for newly appointed assistant lecturers who could be facing various unpredictable situations during their lectures or discussion classes, this lesson plan is a creative process which provides a guiding framework to facilitate purposeful learning. Not only that, but also a good lesson plan gives confidence to the lecturer when delivering the lesson.

In order to enhance the knowledge and the skills of the students, lecturer needs to guide

them step by step. Therefore, it is essential to have a lesson plan and before starting a lesson, it is essential to clarify the learning outcomes of the course unit, which also should be an identified activity of the lesson plan.

The literature reveals that the importance of lesson planning is emphasized in the education process of many countries. Many studies on learner centred teaching show that it is a process that engages learners and creates an environment of cooperation among peers to behave in a socially conscious manner to focus on group performance rather than individual performance (UNICEF, 2000). In comparison, a teacher-centred instruction compels students to go for rote memorization to pass the high stake testing rather than getting enough chances to work in smaller groups, focusing on their learning difficulties and discussing with their peers and teachers for their "powerful learning" (Hopkins, 2001; 2007; Kumandas & Kutlo, 2010).

Lesson plans affect not only the teacher's instruction but classroom management as well. Characteristics of a well-managed classroom are that (1) students are deeply engaged with their work; which would be possible if their roles are described and they have a goal as provided in a good lesson plan; (2) students know what is expected; which would be possible via routinely implemented good lesson plans; (3) there is little wasted time, confusion; which would be possible via effective implementation of a good lesson plan; and (4) the climate of such a classroom would be work-oriented, but relaxed and pleasant; which would be possible via good time management due to effective implementation of a good lesson plan (Wong 2009).

Borich (2007) states that as a combination of lesson objective designing, teaching, modelling, checking for understanding, re-teaching, and teacher's self-reflection, the lesson plan is a crucial element in the process of meeting national content standards and optimising the outcome of classroom teaching and learning. However, teaching focused theories like Bloom's Taxonomy (1954), experiential learning of Kolb (1984) based on John Dewey's, Kurt Lewin's and Jean Piaget's concepts of learning and flexible approach to teaching revealed that student - centred approach to teaching is a paradigm shift from teacher to learner-centred, a deliberative effort to facilitate learner to achieve learning outcomes by creating conducive learning environment using a variety of activities like activity-based teaching with effective interactive relations between learners and teachers (Gredler, 2009; Johnson & Johnson, 1998).

As the present practice, most lectures are conducted in a continuous process where the lecturer would come to the lecture hall, introduce the topic and deliver the lecture. Along with this traditional practice something which could be observed is that the lecturer would be unable to fulfil learning outcomes achievement and unable to manage the time. Sometimes the lecturer would be unable to cover the whole syllabus components in a given time period. It could be also observed that students are not attentive or focussed in this traditional lecture method.

The other side of the coin, the lecturer would go to the lecture with a rough sketch in his/her head which usually includes the main topic of the lesson, the sub-topics and the items to be discussed under each topic. When delivering the lecture, sometimes the lecturer finds it

difficult to cover all the aspects of the lesson and there is not enough time left to answer students' questions. On the contrary, there could be a lot of time left from the lecture hour when students become only passive listeners.

Methodology

This study is situated in a qualitative and quantitative mixed research design. The data were collected from 45 first-year students who had followed 'Introduction to Data Analysis' course unit. Lesson plans with in-class activities were designed based on experiential learning (Kolb 1984) to include Teaching Learning Activities (TLAs). The outcomes of the lesson plan and in-class learning activities were analysed by using student-feedback and in-class observations during the planned activity. According to the designed lesson plan, the discussion class was divided into several groups and given the reading materials related to the lesson. The students were guided to read those materials and present as small group presentations. In following the lesson plan for a student-centred discussion, the students themselves formulate and direct the discussion. One student serves as the facilitator of the discussion, but the discussion flows from student to student.

Results

The lesson plan was prepared according to the proper timeline. Table 1 shows the tutorial lesson plan designed for the discussion session.

Table 1. Tutorial Lesson Plan that was designed and followed for the discussion session

Time allocated	Activity
2 minutes	Discuss on the syllabus items completed up to now
5 minutes	Explanation on today's discussion class (i.e., "Different between facts, information and data" and the activities to be done)
3 minutes	As an initiation for the lesson recalling items related to above topic and given the reading materials related to the lesson
20 minutes	Guided Group discussion
20 minutes	Small Group presentation
5 minutes	Summary on the discussion class conducted and the clarifications

Student perceptions based on feedback revealed that the planned tutorial activities helped students to develop more knowledge on the subject. In discussions, more than 80% of students were observed participating actively.

Thus, a larger group of students (85 %) said that this activity encouraged them to read English articles and improve their subject knowledge as well. Also, 65 % of students recognised that they needed to improve skills in time management while the balance 35 % of students had improved skills in time management. In this way, 90 % of participants responded that they had improved their teamwork skills. But 10 % of students were unable to work with a team.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings suggest that lesson plans can be recommended as a tool to improve student-centred learning as well as develop teachers' self-confidence and time management. When tutorial classes use lesson plans in this way to engage students in planned TLAs in class, students develop better learning. As a teacher observation, I realised that the small group concept is also a very important concept to learn academic knowledge by the student, at different learning levels. As a change in teaching and learning areas, Gibbs and Habeshaw's teaching small group concept has been used as the theoretical background (Gibbs & Habeshaw, 1989). As mentioned by Gibbs and Habeshaw (1989), learning as a group is the best way to learn. Bonwell and Eison (1991) also emphasized the concept of active learning and it is defined as "any activity that involves students in doing things and thinking about the things they are doing". With the use of techniques of the concept, small group presentations are beneficial to students to improve their self-esteem and to do their future work.

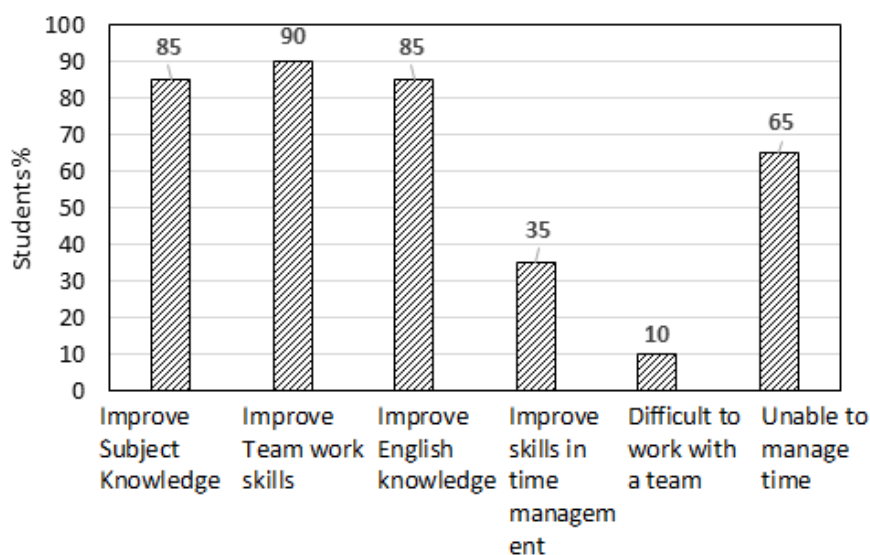


Figure 1. Student perceptions based on their feedback

The responses of the participants displayed a wide range of positive perceptions toward the student-centred learning that was made possible by using lesson plans. Overall, the study revealed that while it was beneficial in specific ways for many students, the student-centred learning method was motivating to effectively impact all participants of this tutorial class. As a summary, this report analysed a way of making a change in teaching and learning with a focus to enhance first year students' student-centred learning skills through implementing tutorials. According to the findings it can be summarised that this would be an effective method for improving student's positive perception of the tutorial class.

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