

THE BEST IS ALWAYS HAPPINESS

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ABSTRACT

An exploratory research was conducted with students of a private business school in Pakistan to know what students really 'want' from their teachers. What is their understanding of 'learning' and which teaching practices promote satisfaction among them? An open ended survey was administered to collect opinions of undergraduate students about the traits and behaviors of teachers they like the most followed by interviews with five 'best' teachers recommended by students to reach at the holistic picture of 'best teaching learning practices' through interpretive analysis. The results demonstrate that students want learning to be more of an 'affective experience' than a plain 'cognitive one.'

Keywords: *Best practices; Teaching and learning; Higher education; Student engagement; Interpersonal relationships*

INTRODUCTION

The quality system in higher education is regarded as one of the approaches towards achieving best practices in teaching and learning (ASQ, 2006). Through adoption of quality assurance system any higher education institution can ensure that it's teaching and learning processes are of creditable standards and quality. But quality aspires for continual improvement, therefore, no one recipe can work for ever. University classroom is the most difficult arena as we are not designing quality for mechanical objects but for young minds aspiring to live life of their own choice. All over the world teachers' research and academic interests are being translated into action to bring the best in their respective classrooms. Some of these practices are centered round use of technology while some other promote action research encouraging students to engage in critical thinking, problem solving, writing reflection journals, etc. But the hard question remains harder, i.e. how to engage a large body of students into learning? Do teachers need to change their practices? If so what could those practices possibly be? This mixed methods research aims to find answer for this question.

Spence (2001, p.15) has noted, "Human Beings are fantastic learners – mastering millions of details of languages, objects, human behavior, and patterns of relations among those details. And they learn all the time." However, as stated by Ruben "the dynamics of student learning are exceedingly complex and do not align in any lock-step fashion to the dynamics of teaching" (2004, p. 251). Every hour, thousands of faculty members enter classrooms at colleges and universities to make it happen, but how many are really successful in reaching their objective in most satisfying of ways? Thus, we must listen to Terenzini and Pascarella's (1994) advice: if undergraduate education is to be enhanced, faculty members, joined by academic and students' affairs administrators, must devise ways to deliver undergraduates education that are as comprehensive and integrated as the ways that students actually learn. It calls for development of completely new mindset to capitalize on the interrelatedness of in – and out of class influences on student learning.

Best practice has been defined as a “comprehensive framework for designing, implementing, and operating at the optimal level of performance”, applicable to a “broad range of organizations” (Axson, 2007, pp. 30, 27). Kawrosky (2008) has identified that best practice entails ‘the most efficient and effective way to deliver a service’ in an effort to meet customer expectations (Taylor, 1967). Moreover, it is not a static or unchanging state; it underlies a phenomenon of continuous learning and improvement suiting the needs of any particular industry (Axson, 2007; Beede and Burnett, 1999; Taylor, 1967).

The term ‘best practice’ bears strong industrial connotation in it like other quality terms imported from business or industry into education. It was not Shank (1995) who had first realized that higher education has all qualities of an industry; much before that Herzberg and associates had drawn attention towards the impact of moving industrial world to the microcosm of the university. They had stated that university has become as complex an industrial organization as exists and the same laws that govern industry govern the effective operation of a university (Herzberg et al., 1959). Consequently, it is becoming increasingly difficult to put a check on the intrusion of the business ethos in university culture as identified by Herzberg and many others to follow. Whereas, it has become imperative for university to regulate conditions that enhance “motivation for work” (Deming, 1932) and promote satisfaction for its internal customers (Juran, 1991), we need to operationalize and adapt concepts like ‘best practice’ to suit education specific needs. This paper is an attempt to draw on best practice that will help private institutions of higher education in Pakistan to better engage their students in learning.

When an HE institution decides to take this challenge, a certain degree of openness and creativity is wanted for changing some long-standing operational and administrative approaches to service delivery. In a teaching learning environment of a university “best Practice” resides in “good teaching” (Allen and Clarke, 2007) and it is important to know how these two concepts are interrelated to each other and/or can find room in each other. Thus, Kawrosky (2008) has suggested that the university teachers must begin to understand teaching in terms of a continuum of improvement that involves doing less of harmful or ineffective practices while doing more of the research-based “best practice”.

Literature review of the problem

Harvey and Green have viewed higher education process as representing a transformation through the “analytical and critical development of the students” (1993, p. 16); while according to Wilson and Fowler (2005), there is a general consensus that a deep approach to learning is desirable in higher education and that influencing students towards deeper approaches is the “key task” of higher education. Moreover, student satisfaction is considerably increased, where ‘action learning’ and ‘critical reflection’ over the learning is involved (Wilson and Fowler, 2005; Arif, 2008). On the other hand Best (1998) has postulated that learning process is concerned with the emotions and feelings that motivate, constrain or shape human action.

Though historically, psychologists have treated emotions as distinct from motivation, but presently, motivational psychologists are beginning to view emotions as the predominately motivating factor behind human behavior (Epstein, 1990; Salovey et al., 2000; Goleman, 1997; 2002). Salovey and Goleman’s theory of emotional intelligence has further developed the concept of ‘self efficacy’ (Bandura, 1997) from a raw recognition of physiological states rising from persuasion and/or mastery experiences to an awareness of bonded relationships of individuals with learning and their commitment with continual improvement of the learning process. Ruben (2004, p. 256) has informed us that “in terms of what students seem to most remember and value, communication and relationships are very important.”

Students are the most vital part of the concept of higher education and Barnett (1992) has stressed that prime importance must be attached to the improvement of the student experiences with learning while making considerations of quality at higher education. Similarly, Tam (2001) has reminded us,

Any measurement of quality and performance evaluation in higher education that falls short of the centrality of student’s experience is bound to be peripheral and fail to provide

information about how students find the experience and how much they are learning and progressing both intellectually and emotionally throughout their years in university.

Thus, the attention of present researchers has been drawn towards the notion of affective education (Beard et al., 2007; Hui & Chang, 2009). Martin (2008) has suggested that while planning for student success a holistic perspective must be adopted, i.e., along with “tangibles” few intangibles must be considered, as she regards ‘affective’ more important in the student life. Mudge et al., (2009) encourage others to explore the importance of emotions in education. According to Cacioppo et al., (2000), the field of social neuroscience suggests that emotions can either enhance or inhibit the ability to learn, with social and cultural influences not only causing behavior but also altering biological processes, reminding education leaders to create and maintain positive emotional climates that enable students to function at optimal levels and excel (Goleman, 2006).

In order to fulfill these needs, Dees et al. (2007) have claimed that teaching needs a ‘sense of artistry’ and like other artistic deeds, teaching artists reflect on their work before, during, and after the moment to inquire into aspects of the experience that are meaningful and transformative. When this reflective process is done well, it heightens the experience for both teacher and student (Bundy, 2003; Eisner, 2002, 2006; Fenner, 2003). However, it remains to be investigated what should be the main focus of this reflection: style and content of teaching or the art of relationships with students. Côté and Allahar (2007) have pointed out that raised in a climate of entitlement, today students expect to slide through university as they had done in high school and the faculty insisting on applying high academic standards is punished by poor teaching evaluations and low enrollments. On the other hand faculty who place little effort in their teaching often place very low expectations on students and become popular among students. As a result they destroy quality of teaching and learning resulting in inflation of grading. Côté and Allahar (2007) call such situation “the disengaged leading the disengaged” and in such an atmosphere how ‘best practice’ will emerge?

While emphasizing the importance of faculty-student relationships as a best practice, where these ‘temporary satisfying relationships’ as discussed above will fall? The situation is made further complex, when expectations of both, the faculty and the students do not match; as cited in Ruben (2004): 80 percent of entering students felt career preparation was a very important goal for attending college, yet only 20 percent of the faculty shared this view (Kuh, 2001; Sax et al., 1996). Thus, the question remains challenging: how teachers can create a mastery-focused classroom? A wealth of research has shown that students’ adoption of a mastery goal orientation is associated with optimal academic beliefs and engagement behaviors (Kaplan, et al., 2002; Elliot, 2005; Anderman and Wolters, 2006; Patrick and Ryan, 2008), reinforced by friendly and approachable view of teacher (Brophy, 1981; Ames, 1992; Turner and Patrick, 2004). It involves creating a “culture of connection” (Martin, 2008), product of a cognitive mediation model of motivation, whereby, students’ thoughts, perceptions, and interpretations are mediated by the affective of behavior of teachers (Ames, 1992; Turner and Patrick, 2004; Patrick and Ryan, 2008).

den Brok et al. (2005) have studied teacher-student interpersonal behavior in two independent dimensions: 1) Influence (teacher dominance versus submissiveness) and 2) Proximity (teacher cooperation versus opposition). They (den Brok et al.) have concluded that these two dimensions ‘structure every teacher behavior’ and can be further subdivided into eight sectors: leadership, helpful/friendly behavior, understanding behavior, student freedom, uncertain behavior, dissatisfied behavior, admonishing behavior and strictness. Moreover, healthy teacher-student interpersonal relationships were found to be prerequisite for engaging students in learning activities strongly linked to student achievement (Brekelmans, et al., 2000; den Brok *et al.*, 2004). Four factors, 1) the pleasure (or enjoyment) students experience in lessons of a subject; 2) the relevance of the subject (for future work or other subjects and domains); 3) the confidence students have in learning and achieving for the subject; and 4) the effort they put in or interest they have for the subject were found to be major reasons for students’ satisfaction and engagement in learning at undergraduate level (Fraser, 1998; Brekelmans, *et al.*, 2000; den Brok *et al.*, 2004).

Aboudan (2008) has alerted that today we deal with students who are 'digital natives' and 'multi-tasking' adults; they become numb with under-stimulation. Thus, a classroom with 'black and white atmosphere' (O'Brien and Bauer, 2005) will not keep students engaged, and now teachers must shift to "multiple literacies" (Miller, 2007), i.e., involving multi-media technologies and bringing real life color to the classroom, allowing students to use communications gadgets like cell phones and i-pads for quick inquiry and search within the classroom, giving them a chance to remain busy shifting rapidly from one task to another in a rapidly twitching speed of decision-making and stimulating interactivity.

METHODOLOGY

Recently a paradigm shift has been observed from positivist normative approaches to more open interpretive and in-depth approaches towards research problems (Schon, 1991; Imel et al., 2002). In the last 20 years, the emphasis has moved to 'mixed-method' research designs, in which interviews are often used as an 'additional' method to illuminate some findings gathered by surveys (Cresswell, 2003; Cresswell and Plano-Clark, 2007). Using variety of methods in study enhance richness of data and improve the credibility of the study (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004). The focus of the present study is to draw attention of faculty towards 'good teaching practices' as recognized by students; therefore it was necessary to involve in a discourse, both with the students and faculty to identify behaviors that would generate "best teaching-learning practices" for undergraduate students of business schools.

Researchers agree that it is simply a statistical impossibility that all practices are equally effective, that differences in practice are neither meaningful nor significant, or that these differences can be rationalized away because everything can be said to work for at least some teachers and some pupils to some degree at some time (den Brok et al., 2004; Miller et al., 2005; Côté and Allahar, 2007). Thus method needed for study should be both: objective and yet flexible. Triangulation design (Cresswell and Plano-Clark, 2007) provided that pragmatic approach. The researcher has tried her best to check all kinds of biases and prejudices by giving equal importance to the opinions of faculty and students in getting solution for best teaching and learning practices, whereas, the researcher herself has acted as critical observer trying to maintain the balance between the discourses (Lewin, 1948; Freire, 1972).

THE PROCESS

A qualitative survey comprising open responses was held with 150 undergraduate students of a private university's business school. The students in survey were asked for their preferences of resources in acquiring information as well as seeking entertainment and recreation. Students were asked to relate to teaching and learning experiences in current semester. Moreover, students had to nominate five best practices of teachers which they think were able to engage them in learning in the classroom and identify two teaching practices, which were not successful in keeping them engaged and motivated for learning in and out of the classroom for that particular subject. After analyzing the student survey, ten teachers were interviewed to know their ideas about teaching practices that may cause engagement or disengagement of students in learning. The interviews were semi structured to gain in-depth perspective about their personal frame of reference for teaching and student learning.

The findings were coded (Basil, 2003) and emerging themes about "best practices" were identified after rigorous manipulation of data to reach detailed, thick descriptions. The findings are shared using direct remarks from students and faculty to capture their individual and personal perspectives and experiences (Patton, 1990, p. 40). The ethic of minimal intrusion was maintained through out the study (BERA, 2005). To keep anonymity of the participants intact pseudo acronyms has been assigned to faculty names.

DISCUSSION

After the results have been coded, following themes have emerged for debate and discussion.

Careful choice of media

Results obtained from student survey have informed about student preferences in spending their time as well as about their choice of information sources. Results demonstrate that most of the students prefer spending time on visual media, like internet, movies, TV shows and games rather than newspapers, magazines and books. However, students who have a GPA above 3.5 do not spend more than two hours on net daily and they have a tendency to read books other than course books. However, the percentage of such students is a meager one, just 7 %. It shifts our attention to the other 93%, who appear to engage themselves in media but the purpose of 'engagement' appears to be recreation and entertainment rather than education or information. It shows that our academic system still reinforces the use of traditional literacy system and the use of media is highly compartmentalized in students generally reserved for pure entertainment. Hence, need exists that teachers should equip themselves for engaging wider population of students through multiple digital sources like media and internet.

Teachers also expressed slight agreement about giving preference to use multiple sources for learning, but many would not like to lose the value of traditional authority related with transmission modes of teaching. They were skeptic of the use of modern gadgets in the classroom. They had totally different purview about disengagement of students.

Quality intake of students

Private institutions of higher education face the challenge of quality intake of students globally and they are working hard to meet this challenge. As higher education is much cheaper in public universities of Pakistan, most of the public universities attract top merit.

The teachers in their interviews have also highlighted the problem of quality intake of students in private universities. AB pointed out: We have to enable our students to face the rigor of studies needed for higher education learning to discipline themselves for the hard work. At one hand we are charged with demands of social justice, on the other hand we are pressurized to meet enrollment demands and not turn away too many unprepared students. BM said that we can't be elitist in our approach restricting the opportunity of quality education to the selected few; therefore we should avoid branding students on the basis of essence, hence, denying them the chance of improvement.

The facilities provided at private universities such as air-conditioned classrooms, internet and multimedia are much better than those offered in the public universities, whereas, the teacher community is the same shared by the public and private universities. Here the critical question is raised: where does the problem lie? Whether the student essence makes the difference: because the same teachers fail to deliver with better infrastructural facilities? Where do we need improvement: in students' essence or in teachers' practice? Whether the change in student capacity can occur without change in teachers' practice?

This dilemma is better explained in words of Côté and Allahar (2007), "what is our social responsibility as educators to the students who are sorted, weeded, or cooled out of the system?" And who will empathize and sympathize with faculty which must teach disengaged students who are heedlessly heading towards disaster, just passing through courses on their way to the job market, never realizing the real expectations of the market itself? This mix of 'credentialism' and 'massification' has made faculty into "reluctant gatekeepers" or "disengaged leading the disengaged" (Côté and Allahar, 2007). Even after realizing that higher education "is about the sculpting of the human mind and spirit", many teachers remain disengaged because of their personal "fear of failure", that they would fail to do the needful by changing their practice. How will a teacher transform into a vigilant shepherd leading his herd to shelter and not to a slaughter house of competitive corporate world? Learning of that 'best practice' will indeed save the soul of both the students and faculty in higher education institutions.

Careful exercise of command over knowledge

Most of the students value teachers' command over knowledge of the subject, but they do not want it to be loaded off on the students. Moreover, the students would not appreciate a show off of knowledge and expertise and the arrogance; instead many of the students want to adopt slower pace and they want to learn gradually through "vicarious experiences". They want the teachers to be enthusiastic and motivating and bring "life into classroom" by quoting examples, but they have expressed the 'want' of using digital technology frequently.

TD remarked: the students closely inspect and minutely scrutinize teachers' behavior and actions taken in classroom. They expect perfection from teacher but at the same time they seek relaxation and forgiveness from teachers. BM added: the teachers don't want their students to be lazy, timid and confused; they wish to see them disciplined in the best possible way. On the other hand the students want to come up to the standards of their teachers, but they do not want them to command arrogantly or rudely; they want their teachers to be patient and compassionate. How a teacher will take this challenge? The behaviors they as teachers will be able to reinforce will set the ethos of learning, engagement and disengagement in classroom. Some of the good practices suggested by teachers in this respect include: mastery of the subject, encouraging interaction among students and teacher, recognizing each student as individual, promoting individual respect among students, and maintaining a good sense of humor.

It is worth noting that most of the teachers have almost the same level of command over the subject matter, but some are better appreciated than others. Students have highlighted some of the teacher qualities creating the distinction. These are: (1) teachers who are organized and well prepared for the lecture, (2) teachers who are disciplined but they reinforce discipline with personal example with no shades of coercion, (3) teachers who are not partial and unfair and stick to their principles, and finally (4) teachers who clearly speak of their standards of performance and expectations from students are better followed by students rather than the teachers, who are moody, unpredictable, have poor control over expression of their emotions and can easily lose their temper.

The students wanted teachers to be empathetic, understanding situations from students' point of view, and not being moody, judgmental and anxious to see high levels of performance. The students complained that sometimes teachers are not very flexible in accommodating various learning needs of the students; instead they prefer conformance to their personal style and standards of learning. This way knowledge becomes a burden on heart rather than becoming wings to let them sail freely in worlds of imagination and creativity.

Innovation

The students are in the most energetic and creative phase of their life; thus they hate stereotypes and stereotyped learning and want to do something new that will mark their individuality. It calls for innovation in teaching methodology. AB laments: unfortunately most of the efforts regarding innovation are focused on business approaches, i.e., economizing resources and increasing efficiency, promoting academic managerialism, thus constricting the chances of real happiness for its internal customers. BM added: many a time teachers feel stuck with the pressure of completing a course outline (within a time frame; sometimes they are constrained by available resources of space, technology and /or time to carry out certain activities, agreed TD.

Perhaps knowledge age has passed and we are entering a "digital era", where youth are more attuned to using of sophisticated gadgets, like i-pads and i-phones, podcasts, etc. whereas, higher education systems have not been able to include, cell phones and emails in stream of formal teaching as yet (NR). SR pointed out: much of the formal teaching is still restricted to white and black boards and chalks or markers; this world does not match with students' 3D world of gaming and other entertainment media. TD added: teachers, themselves have a very ambivalent attitude towards "technology" perceived as 'distraction' rather than source of engagement, and that conflict is perhaps being passed on to the youth by our generation and they have learned to compartmentalize 'learning' and 'technology'.

SR stressed that we have to allow students to be themselves if we want them to become 'good learners'. BM had added that we have to let them talk of their personal interests, likes and dislikes and recognize their achievements in any field regardless of learning in a specific discipline in order to get entry into their personal lives and gaining their confidence to become their coach and mentors. All teachers have agreed that "Modern technology" can serve to build such a bridge. To suit this purpose, exercises to write a unique "marketing message" for a brand, making a website, starting blogs, and shooting films, interviews for some research can engage students towards productive efforts in learning.

Quality of interpersonal relationships

Student survey results have also disclosed the secret that students look up to the quality of teachers to indulge in good interpersonal relationships. Those teachers are held in high esteem, who know 'science of moods' and do not displace negative emotions on students frequently (Goleman et al., 2002). The interviews with teachers reflected the theme "quality of interpersonal relationships" again. The teachers were found to be appreciative of traits like "sociability" and "openness to experience". They talked about giving preference to students needs, having an ability to command the "ethos" of classroom by changing students' moods rather than deteriorating their personal moods to anguish or anxiety. Some values highly appreciated by students in their teachers are that of "fairness" and "transparency" in evaluation, individual respect, kindness and forgiveness.

AB counseled: every good or bad learning culture emerges from the degree of involvement of the teacher with the students present at a specific time and place. Students come with their own limitations and strengths; and wants and expectations, and sometimes they do not match with teachers' expectations being too low or too high; the more the gap is between teacher-student expectations, the more is the dissatisfaction and disengagement at both sides. However, the responsibility lies always with the more powerful to be gracious and benevolent and adjust with the demands of the weak and ignorant. SR commands teachers to persevere and be patient like earth is when allowing a garden to grow in it, quoting the Sage Rumi, which translates: How much gracious the mother earth is, bearing with patience constant manipulation, i.e. sowing, tilling, hardening and watering; allowing others to grow while bearing all pain oneself and yielding fruit to others.

Not every teacher reaches such level of perfection. Sadly, it was noted that there are teachers who are very selective and chose only few people to connect with; therefore they are either labeled as arrogant or indifferent or they are viewed as partial and biased and fail to cultivate "connection culture" (Beard *et al.*, 2007) with larger population of their class. MN expressed concern for such teachers because they often feel rejected, isolated and therefore wrongly project the same feelings onto their students. SR recommends: such teachers must review their own sense of self respect and attach it with 'coming up to expectations of others' rather than 'expecting conformance from others'. Hence, it may be deduced from the argument that a teacher who is listening to his/her students and gifts understanding and kindness to others nurtures the best practice 'empathy' bringing resonance in relationships (Goleman et al., 2002; Goleman, 2006).

Future Implications

It is envisaged, therefore, it is not just use of technology or innovation but "reinventing student-teacher relationships" through technology and innovation that is best source of engagement and thus 'best practice'. In order to indulge in this best practice, sometimes we may have to give lead to our students and involve them in teaching and learning activities as partners. It is a tough challenge and how academia will face this challenge will shape the "success" and "failure" of their students at learning. Academia, today, must ask themselves the question: Are we ready to learn from each other, and from our students? How will we make this learning adventure successful that 'others' are ready to follow it? Usually university cultures support managerialism and innovation is not as much rewarded as it is questioned. What one will be ready to sacrifice: may be one has to wait longer for desired raise or promotion by not conforming to academic managerialism.

At the same time academic managers will also have to review their policies? How much risk they can take to afford “failure of innovative practices”? To what extent innovative practices are recognized and rewarded? Unless innovation is recognized by higher authorities, such teaching activities will remain individual – good practice, may be a source of envy for others, and will not become ‘best practice’ for the whole institution and teaching community. The management has to ask oneself serious question: whether I want my faculty to conform to “proffered” practices of my choice or allow them the freedom to evolve in a free learning community? Quality is reaching mutual agreement on excellence and its responsibility lies upon every member of the institution. Thus, we have to care about learning and happiness of everyone in teaching and learning, especially for our students by not forgetting the faculty.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, I must agree with the following synthesis provided by this study:

The academia is faced with the challenge to bring those students into safety net of engagement who are in other words ‘distracted by entertainment through technology’.

Best practice is that ‘good teaching practice’ which is bought in by the students and becomes the part of institutional culture. It breeds hope and confidence in students that they will develop necessary knowledge and skills in them for future employability and thus satisfying them becomes source of happiness for everyone in the institution.

Best teachers are coaches and mentors who are masters in qualifying students’ learning experiences as ‘important’ and ‘meaningful’ and as stations on way to self-actualization.

All efforts should reside in designing teaching and learning activities that promote hope and self confidence in the students enhancing their experiences to the level of self satisfaction.

Real happiness lies in (students and faculty) working out better relationships between the primary and the internal customers as the quality of the process of education relies on better transactions between the faculty and students.

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