



ENCOURAGING STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION TO ADOPT A DEEP APPROACH TO LEARNING

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Abstract

Globalization has permitted technical progress in the field of communications which enable the users to access and exchange information at any time and from any place in the world, which has largely facilitated the speeding up of the production, as well as the sharing of goods, services, capital flows and also ideas. In the present scenario there is a need for learning to be more creative and generative and the focus of learning process shifts from teaching to self-directed learning, and learning as one time event to learning as a lifelong process. All this calls for the definition of educational programmes on a competency based approach, which implies that there should be focus on students achieving a stated number of clearly defined skills or competencies at the end of their course. In higher education as students' progress in a course their conception will move from one of acquiring "discrete packages of information" to one that constitutes a change in themselves and the world around them. Many of the students come from school backgrounds that fail to prepare them for demands of higher education. The fact that many students did not get the point of what they were studying simply because they were not looking for it. They are looking for the facts they thought they would be tested on. They are not looking for the meaning of the text. In a sense, for them, at least as they perceived the situation, the meaning of the text stood in direction relation to the way they expected to be assessed. They are taking what has become known as a "surface approach" rather than a "deep approach" to learning. There are many factors that influence the way students learn. It is possible for educators to foster high quality learning outcomes through active learning by giving students opportunity to demonstrate the quality and integrity of their learning facilitating a desirable approach.

Keywords: *Approaches to learning, Deep approach, Surface approach.*

In higher education it is expected that as students progress through their studies they will develop personal understanding and it is posited that their conception of learning may evolve concurrently. This means that as students progress in a course their conception will move from one of acquiring "discrete packages of information" to one that constitutes a change in themselves and the world around them. But what we really see is that students never progress in to meaningful approach rather they hold a reproductive conception of learning. This may be attributed to an emphasis on memorizing during school education. Many of the students come from school backgrounds that fail to prepare them for demands of higher education.

Recent studies of conceptions of learning held by students in higher education both in western and non western cultures shows that there are common elements to conceptions of learning across

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cultures and these are closely aligned six conceptions of learning. Five conceptions of learning were originally identified by Saljo (1979): 1) increasing knowledge, 2) memorizing, 3) acquiring facts or procedures which can be used at a later date, 4) abstracting meaning, and, 5) interpreting to understand reality. A sixth conception of changing as a person was later added by Marton, Dall’Alba and Beaty (1993).

These conceptions form a hierarchy with the first three focusing on quantitative dimensions of learning while the latter three are characteristically qualitative. The first three conceptions concern taking in information as though it was something ready-made and devoid of meaning. Quantitative conceptions are usually correlated with the adoption of a surface approach to learning, whilst qualitative conceptions are usually related to deep approaches. The fact that many students did not get the point of what they were studying simply because they were not looking for it. They are looking for the facts they thought they would be tested on. They are taking what has become known as a "surface approach" rather than a "deep approach" to learning.

The defining features of a deep and a surface approach have been described by Entwistle (1987) as outlined below:

Deep Approach

Surface Approach

Intention to understand

Intention to complete task requirements

Vigorous interaction with content

Memorise information needed for assessments

Relate new ideas to previous knowledge

Failure to distinguish principles from examples

Relate concepts to everyday experience

Treat task as an external imposition

Relate evidence to conclusions

Focus on discrete elements without integration

Examine the logic of the argument

Unreflectiveness about purpose or strategies

Marton and Saljo (1976; 1997) were very clear that the two approaches were not personality traits or fixed characteristics but were intentions. If students perceive the learning context to require a deep approach, then they will take it, if however, they perceive the learning context to demand



regurgitation of factual knowledge, in exams for example, and then they will take a surface approach. Entwistle and Entwistle (1991) found that, while lecturers may claim high quality learning outcomes such as conceptual understanding, critical analysis and independent interpretation, which require students to adopt a deep approach to learning, the assessment practices adopted often seem to encourage much more limited goals, namely the accurate reproduction of course content. One aspect of deep learning approaches is the development of generic skills such as problem solving, thinking critically and making judgements.

It appears that in many ways, traditional teaching pushes students toward superficial levels of engagement with material, even as it hopes to do the opposite. Assessment practice, more than any other practice in higher education, communicates to students the type of learning required of them (Biggs, 1992). Students alter their approach to learning in line with the perceived requirements of the learning context (Ramsden, 1992; Trigwell & Prosser, 1991). Indeed, Elton and Laurillard (1979) wrote that "the quickest way to change the way students learn is by changing the assessment system".

Factors influencing the students' adoption of approaches to learning

'Approach,' embraces a sense of the student's intention in taking up a learning task as well as how he goes about the task (processing it). While deep and surface approaches characterize the way students engage with a task or unit, they do not describe how the students develop or choose the respective approach to learning. Biggs (1987) developed the Presage, Process and Product model that describes the process of student learning. The presage factors refer to those personal and situational (ie. institutional) that prevail at a point of entry to higher education. These could relate to abilities, personal values and the various elements of the teaching and learning context in the department in which the student joins. Process factors form the basis of the "learning process complex" which comprises the motives the students have for studying a particular course and the strategies they will use to pursue their studies. Product factors refer to both objective (eg. exams) and subjective (eg. satisfaction) measures of performance.

The 3P Model of Learning describes the way in which students' approach learning tasks and how they organize their time to complete them. Besides, Booth et al. (as cited in Hall et al., 2002) found out that although students cannot simultaneously adopt both surface and deep approaches to a specific task, their approach may interact with the way they organize their time to complete the task. For example, student may rote learn in an organized way (surface and achieving approaches) or search for meaning in an organized way (deep and achieving approaches). The model implies that students do not adopt deep and surface approaches to learning because they have deep or surface learning personalities but because different approaches are a response to students' learning environments. Hall et al. (2002) and Bonanno et al. (1998) found out that changes made to the learning environment which included the use of group problem solving exercises, group presentations and group assignments in first accounting subjects resulted in students increasing their deep learning approach. Meanwhile, Ball (1995) on the other hand found out that applying problem based learning strategies and real life exercises can promote deep learning approaches among students. The Biggs (1987) 3P Model of Learning emphasized the importance of the students' perceptions of the learning environment towards their learning approach. Referring to the Biggs (1987) 3P Model of Learning,



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although educators do not have much control over students' characteristics, they do have control over the learning environment. Gow et al. and Sharma (as cited in Hall et al., 2002) have found several variables which will influence the students' learning approach such as workload, the nature of assessment tasks, teaching style, staff/student ratios, the structure of the course and lectures, enthusiasm of lecturers and tutors, generation of a personal learning context and provision of feedback. Factors that detract from deep learning are heavy workloads and the exclusive use of formal teaching methods such as lecturing. Deep learning can also be achieved by cutting down on lecture time and extending individual study time and time designated for projects.

Strategies to encourage the students to take a deep approach to learning

The students can be motivated to take up a deep approach by

- By placing less emphasis on traditional study skills advice
- Attempting to raise students' meta cognitive awareness of their own learning processes
- Actively encouraging them to take a deep approach to their studies. This can be done through taking into consideration the following factors.

1. Student perceived relevance in the subject matter.

Students will not struggle to achieve a deep understanding of material that seems pointless to them. To motivate them to do it, let them know up front what the material has to do with their everyday lives and with significant problems they will eventually be called on to solve (e.g. developing alternative energy sources, avoiding future Bhopals).

2. Clearly stated instructional objectives, practice and feedback

Students are not born knowing how to analyze deeply, and little in their pre-college experience is likely to have fostered that ability. To get them to pull meaning out of lecture material and solve problems that go beyond those in the text, there is a need to spell these objectives and give concrete examples of the kind of reasoning desired. Then explicitly ask the students to carry out deep analysis in class and on homework and give them constructive feedback on their attempts.

3. Reasonable workload.

If students have to spend all their time and energy just keeping up they'll fall back on a surface approach.

4. Good teaching where faculty is well prepared, confident and shows

- Openness to student - Faculty are friendly, flexible, helpful
- Freedom in learning - Students have choice in what they study
- Clear goals and standards - Assessment standards, expectations are clearly defined
- Vocational relevance - Courses seen as relevant to future careers

**5. Research also indicates the following instructional methods help promote deep learning:**

- Encouraging faculty/student interaction
- Encouraging student/student interaction (e.g. group projects, peer tutoring)
- Using active and interactive teaching methods (e.g. case studies, buzz groups)
- Making links with what students already know to encourage sense of structure
- Allowing students input into course goals and methods, being receptive and flexible
- Discussing/teaching learning skills explicitly
- Trying to link course topics to students' lives and career aspirations

6. Following suggestions enable educators to select appropriate assessment methods when teaching for deep learning:

- Define assessment goals and tasks clearly, and ensure they are congruent
- Allow choice of assessment tasks
- Stress tasks that allow time for information gathering, depth, and reflection
- Encourage collaborative projects
- Choose tasks that require integration of information from a range of sources
- Give full and proactive feedback on labs, assignments, and tests
- Cooperative learning that allows students to internalize information, linking it in personal ways to what they already know.
- Problem based learning as it develops self directed learning skills.
- group interactions in the preparation of the result
- students peer review each other's work
- assignments that require critical decision making, selection of valid viewpoints, proposal and justification of a hypothesis

CONCLUSION

To improve the quality of student's approaches to learning it is suggested that educators determine student's perceptions of the subject, about assessment, workload, teaching and the support they receive. As an approach is a specific reaction to a task within a particular learning context, it is said that adopting a context to affect changes in student's perceptions may create differences in approaches to learning. It is possible for educators to foster high quality learning outcomes through active learning by giving students opportunity to demonstrate the quality and integrity of their learning facilitating a desirable approach. However it is important to note that educators may also encourage low quality learning outcomes. Again understanding approaches to learning have deeper significance than simply modelling students performance .They are seen as educational philosophy ,which should



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inform educators and administrators ,motivated to improve the quality of student learning rather than the ability to reproduce large chunks of knowledge.

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