

PERCEIVED BARRIERS IN USING ACTIVE AND ENGAGING LEARNING STRATEGIES AT DEGREE COLLEGE LEVEL

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Abstract

Faculty of Degree College extensively use the traditional lecture method in their classrooms. There is a need to use certain Active and Engaging learning strategies that will not only engage the learners but stimulate their thinking and result in meaningful and real learning. The current study was undertaken to study the perceived barriers in implementing Active Learning Strategies by Faculty of Degree College of the Science Stream of a suburban College in Mumbai. The researcher conducted a Workshop on Active and Engaging Strategies, the objective being to motivate the faculty to employ these strategies, to help them envision the strategies that they deem suitable for their topics and to share the barriers that they perceive that they will encounter in implementing them. The exercise was to help them vocalise their concerns, reflect on them and explore the possibilities beyond these barriers. The method used for analysing the primary data collected from source was quantitative as well as qualitative. The outcome of the workshop was motivation and an increased level of readiness to implement the strategies. The researcher hopes that this study will motivate the faculty to experiment and explore active and engaging strategies and make an attempt to surpass the barriers.

Key words: Active and Engaging Learning Strategies, motivation, barriers.

Introduction

In Higher Education, Lecture method has been a popular instructional method. A well-structured lecture that is delivered with the help of relevant, interesting examples, and other strategies that hold the interest of the students can facilitate learning at the same time help reach out large number of students and economise on time. On the other hand, most of the times the lectures tend to encourage a one-way communication between the instructor and the learners with learners being passive, mentally absent in the class or too engrossed in taking notes that are regurgitated on the exam paper sheets without making their way to student's brains.

Active Learning strategies, employed in the classrooms at any level increase student engagement, facilitate learning through interaction with peers, the learning material and the instructor, develop critical thinking and enhance communication skills. Instead of passively receiving the knowledge from the teachers, students are actively involved in thinking, constructing, restructuring their concepts and learning. When active learning strategies are effectively employed and students take charge of their learning the learning becomes meaningful and permanent. Higher Education requires a role reversal and there is a need to transform teacher-oriented classes to student-oriented classes.

Being teacher educators, we are engaged in teaching Pedagogy, an academic subject to our student teachers. We also guide them extensively on how to plan their lessons delivered in secondary school, employing most engaging strategies in the class that ensure maximum participation of the learners resulting in better understanding, retention and achievement. As a teacher of a professional course like B.Ed., using of a variety of active learning strategies in class is extremely essential, as there cannot be a better way of teaching than demonstrating and setting an example.

My observation during interactions with Teachers of Degree College during Orientation and Refresher courses arranged as Professional development Programmes, is that faculty of Degree College extensively use the lecture method in their classes. They also have expressed their desire to be trained in the pedagogy of teaching. They seem to have settled in the groove of their own teaching styles and many have accepted their methods to be the norm. A few may want to experiment but then they are reminded of so many barriers that come their way and sometimes they find difficult to surpass.

Fortunately, before the lockdown, I was invited in a suburban Degree College to share some Active Learning Strategies and motivate the faculty to adapt the same in their classroom teaching. The researcher conducted a workshop and documented the findings. This paper is an outcome of the data collected as observations, interactions and written responses of the participants.

The workshop conducted was on Active Learning Strategies. The learning strategies that I identified to share with them were Problem Based Learning, Flipped Learning, Cooperative Learning Strategies-Jigsaw, Reader's Theatre, Think Pair Share, Quiz/crosswords/Scrabble, One Minute Paper.

Population and Sample

The sample of the study were 40 Faculty members of Degree College of Science stream of a suburban Mumbai College, selected incidentally from a population of faculty teaching in Science stream in Degree colleges of Mumbai. The subjects of study were from the streams of Microbiology, Biotechnology, Botany Physics and Chemistry.

Data and Sources of Data

For this study primary data was collected in the form of observation, interactions and written feedback of the participants on a questionnaire that had three questions; one in the Yes and No format, one MCQ and one open ended.

The Variables of the Study

The different strategies demonstrated were the Independent variable while the barriers that the subjects of the study shared were the dependent variable.

Research Methodology

The study was conducted through a workshop that demonstrated the use of Active Learning Activities and then collecting authentic primary data from the participants by responding to a Feedback questionnaire. The researcher also observed the participants very critically, their verbal and non-verbal communication, noted down the interactions with the subjects during the workshop, during the Lunch Break and after the workshop apart from their written responses.

A quantitative and qualitative analysis was used for the study.

The objectives of the study were: -

- a) to demonstrate some active learning strategies
- b) to motivate the faculty to adapt the strategies
- c) to provide a forum to faculty to vocalise their perceived barriers to implementing the active learning strategies.
- d) to discuss ways of dealing with the concerns

The **workshop was conducted** over a day with the following steps:

- Teacher entered the class, greeted and distributed the scrabble sheets.

Teacher instructed them that they have to unscramble the words...fill in the letters in the last phrase....

The words were ATTENTIVE, THINKING, COLLABORATING and MOTIVATED.... A few circled letters from the four words were used to complete the Phrase - *In order to be* LIFE LONG LEARNERS...

The subjects were very excited like school children and wanted more time to be able to unscramble and get the response!

- Introduction of the Workshop-The researcher then Welcomed the participants to her class on Active and Engaged learning specifying that together they shall learn from each other some methods and techniques that can help all to actively engage their students in the classroom and in learning.
- The researcher Introduced herself and appreciated the participants who were faculty of Science stream and already accustomed to scientific thinking and sharing truths of the universe with their students, highlighting that the session was going to help them share the wonderful techniques they were already using and gain insights into some other tried and tested ones used by teachers all over the world.
- The objectives of Workshop were shared
- To know the participants the researcher gave them post its on which they wrote their first names in bold and pasted it on the left-hand side of their shoulder.
- In order to set the tone of teaching the researcher flashed humorous images of classroom situations (like inattentive and bored students, technology addicted students etc.) and initiated a discussion in the class.
- Round Table Technique - The participants were asked write down 3 barriers/challenges they face in terms of teaching...e.g. overcrowded classrooms/unmotivated students.... The researcher collected the papers and read out the responses of the participants and a discussion followed.
- The group was now divided into groups and the Jigsaw technique was used to get the groups read up the material provided by the researcher on a) Problem based learning b) Use of Technology- Flipped Learning, use of audio/video/movie clips c) Cooperative learning strategies d) Interactive Lecture - Debate, Role Play & Simulation
- The participants groups were re arranged four times so that the cycle of Jigsaw was completed and the final groups were able to discuss all the active strategies within the group. Then there was a whole class discussion.

- One Minute Paper-The researcher asked the participants to take a minute to reflect and write down their take-aways from the session.
- The researcher then flashed a Concept Map that summarized the presentation (all techniques employed during the session) and their significance.
- The participants were then divided into groups. The participants had to list down the methods/techniques which they can adapt and the topics that they can teach in their classrooms.
- Sharing ideas with the whole group.
- The researcher then shared a few tips for small beginnings for the participants.
- The workshop was concluded with an inspirational story.

Result and Discussion of the Study:

Achievement of the objectives:

The workshop was able to achieve its objective of motivating the staff to use the Active Learning Strategies because in the feedback form to the item – I am sure I can implement these strategies-100% of the participants responded that they would implement the strategies in their classes.

Some of the responses were- “I am charged up to implement these strategies”,

“I am sure I can take baby steps towards using these strategies.”

“I am ready to make small beginnings.”

“I can club different strategies and work out my own.”

“I can adapt them to suit the needs of my learners.”

One of the participants shared that she was already making use of Debate in classes of Microbiology and was ready to help others organise it in their classes.

It was evident that the sample under study was open to learning new techniques and exhibited a positive mind set and readiness to learn and adapt.

Most Preferred Active Learning Strategy

On the question -Which of the strategies used in the workshop you would like to adapt and use?

The responses are as follows:

50% opted for Problem Based learning and Flipped Classroom teaching.

As the participants were faculty of Science Stream, Problem based learning appealed to them. They shared that they could take Case studies and Newspaper articles in the class, pose them as problems that would bring out various facets of the problem and its solutions and also help in delivering the content in a more engaging manner.

Those who opted for the Flipped Learning, believed that a lot of factual content can be shared with the students before the class and then having a discussion later for deeper understanding during the lecture will facilitate a more interactive session. They felt that it was easy to implement as practically all their students possess Smart phones. They were not sure if all students will respond but were sure that the motivated lot of students will positively respond to the sharing of the notes before the lectures.

20 % said that they would use the co-operative learning strategies. They felt that during small group lectures the co operative learning strategies will help involve all students I the class and also reach out to the shy and average students who will feel comfortable discussing with their peers in small groups.

10% said that they would like to summarise their topics on completion with the help of graphical representation. It is a very handy tool that will help convey the key points of their topic in a visual manner, show the inter connectedness of the aspects of the topic and also be a useful ready reckoner tool for the students while revising for the exams.

10% expressed their desire to use SCRABBLE and CROSSWORDS to be used to introduce the topic as well as use it towards the end of a topic to introduce an element of fun in the class. Especially, because this will appeal to the young learners. Apart from that, there are a lot of ICT Tools available to construct them for which perhaps, they would like to take help from their students if required.

Barriers of implementing the strategies:

Let us now examine the concerns that the participants expressed in their interactions as well as written form in the feedback that would make it difficult for them to implement these activities. They are as follows:

The most often expressed and common concern was

1)How to keep the class engaged for the entire 50 minutes duration. “Students have such a short attention span; they tend to lose interest and feel bored very quickly.” Faculty were sceptical whether their efforts would be productive and fruitful in the class.

They also expressed that many students are physically present but mentally absent. They are there for the compulsion of attendance but lack interest in the topic being discussed, they cannot recall what was done in the previous class and have very short-term memories.

As a researcher I feel that there is a need to kindle the interest of the students and 'win them over' by the faculty. This requires a colossal effort by the teachers but it would be worthwhile in the long run. The faculty needs to motivate themselves and make new beginnings, even if half of the class responds the remaining will also join the band. But the effort and beginnings have to be made. No change is easy to implement, there will always be resistance on part of the faculty as well as students. So, the faculty needs to take the initiative to change. Once word spreads about the new techniques being employed by the teachers in the classrooms, students will also show the anticipated change. We cannot expect changes to take place overnight, change is slow but will definitely take place if the effort is consistent.

2) Overcrowded classrooms- "The strength of some classes is sometimes 120, and how is it possible to plan the resources for such large classes?" This was also a recurrent concern.

I strongly believe that ICT will come to the rescue of the teachers. Students have their Smart Phones and material for Flipped learning or videos, audios that need to be shared can easily be done with students on WhatsApp groups. In fact, there are a lot of official and unofficial WhatsApp groups that are used in the academic and student teacher interactions nowadays. These can be very fruitfully used to organise interactive lessons, making announcements and sharing resources where some very reliable students of the class can be roped in.

The researcher does not guarantee the success rate but definitely this is a medium worth tapping.

3) Heavy and rigid syllabi- "With such heavy and rigid syllabi, it is difficult to integrate any student-centred strategies as the sword of completing the portion is swaying over our heads."

Well, this is the bane of every teacher at any level all across the world. Every topic in the syllabus may not lend itself for innovative and active learning strategies but even a few strategies are tried out for a few topics it would definitely have its impact. The One-minute paper is something that a teacher can attempt, it will get the entire class to participate, as students have to write in their own notebooks, they will be compelled to write when they know that their teachers are serious about it. In the next class they will become better listeners if they know the teacher as a practice makes every body write.

There can be moments that teachers can snatch as a practice and manage to weave them in their everyday routines. A little bit of planning done before hand can facilitate the process for the teachers.

There were other concerns that seemed equally pertinent such as

"I wish to actually share a lot of research in the area of my subject but refrain from doing so as I have very limited time to complete the portion."

Table 1: Concerns of faculty with respect to student behaviour

Student's addictions to their mobile phones and texting during the class
Inter talking during the lectures,
Late coming students
Disinterested students seated on the back benches of the class
Students' lack of interest in lectures and only expecting readymade notes from the teachers.
Lack of student initiative
Poor language abilities of students
Lack of self-confidence

These were valid complaints with respect to student behaviour from the faculty. There is a need for the teachers to reflect on their methods and re-invent ways that will appeal to the younger generation. Making an effort to strike a dialogue with the students outside the class and establish a relationship of co learning with students inside the classroom, building a rapport by breaking the ice between the teachers and students, will pave the way for healthier interactions and more meaningful learning in the classrooms.

One of the faculty members shared, "I am afraid that I may not be able to answer student queries." This could have been the unexpressed concern of many others.

Teachers need to accept that they are co learners and moreover with the explosion of knowledge, not having answers to student queries is not failure of the teacher. Teachers can graciously ask for more time from students and get back to them after gaining more clarity on a topic. Teachers are not infallible they are human!

Conclusion:

In the twenty first century, it is essential that we make a shift from traditional teaching strategies to active and engaging teaching strategies especially at the Degree College level. These methods if employed skilfully will develop critical thinking, researching skill, teamwork, leadership, interpersonal and communication skills. The perceived barriers in implementing these strategies on part of the faculty are justified. But what is required is a lot of self-motivation as well as leadership in the institutions that provides the necessary support in terms of the resources and training to the faculty. Equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills, the faculty will be able to overcome the barriers and its impact will be seen in the student behaviour too. It's time to bring a bout the change.

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