

Creating an Environment for Student Centric Learning through Student Engagement – A Study.

Ravilochan Rao*

Abstract

The student centric learning has been a much debated subject in the higher education field today. In the B-School environment, students have to demonstrate themselves as matured learners and learn to be successful and hence the need for this change is felt more. The onus is on the teacher to redesign and conduct the course in a way that requires students to hold up till the end of the educational program. The current study is about bringing out the Student Centric Learning Process in the institute through Student Engagements. In order to accommodate this, the academic administration allowed changes in the systems and procedures within the purview of the University norms. The classroom environment, pedagogical changes, small group formation, use of Learning Management System, etc. were addressed to create an atmosphere for student engagement. The introduction of ERP as part of the curriculum and how it emerged as student centric activity through student engagement is pivotal to this study. It emerged from the student feedback and classroom experiences that the student centric learning help students to learn better and internalise the understanding of the subject in contrast to rote memorization and managing examination pressures.

Keywords: Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP), Learning Management System, Peer to Peer Teaching-learning, Student Engagement, Voluntary Triggers

Introduction

The student centric learning has been a much debated subject in the higher education field today. This is on account of the desire to switch from lecturing mode to engaging students to experience the teaching-learning process in the classroom and beyond. In the B-School environment, students have to demonstrate themselves as matured learners and learn to be successful and hence the need for this change is felt more. However, the education delivery system remains teacher centered in many B-Schools. Wright¹ quotes Weimer and finds five areas of the teacher-centeredness in the classroom. They are balance of power, the function of the content, the role of the teacher, the responsibility of learning, and the purpose and processes of evaluation. Weimer² points out that in the student-centered classroom, roles of the teacher and the student needs a change. Here the teacher changes from the “sage on the stage” to the “guide on the side” and views the students not as empty vessels to

be filled with knowledge but as seekers to be guided along their intellectual developmental journey. The onus is on the teacher to redesign and conduct the course in a way that requires students to hold up till the end of the educational program.

Literature Review

The research studies by Kuh³, Umbach⁴, focus on how student engagements can be enhanced by the way teachers practise and relate to the students. This results in a learner centered environment and responsibility for learning shifts to the student. Student engagement, according to Chapman⁵ is students’ cognitive investment in, active participation in and emotional commitment to their learning. The Australian Council of Educational Research proposes student engagement as ‘students’ involvement with activities and conditions that are likely to generate ‘high quality learning’ (ACER⁶). Both the definitions focus on students’ active state and commitment for high quality learning. The research findings

*Justice K.S.Hegde Institute of Management, Nitte

of Zepke⁷ on Improving Student Engagement has ten proposals emerged for action. Some of the proposals of this study relevant to the current work are as follows.

- Enable students to work autonomously, enjoy learning relationships with others and feel they are competent to achieve their own objectives
- Recognize that teaching and teachers are central to the engagement
- Create educational experiences for students that are challenging, enriching and extend their academic abilities
- Adapt to changing student expectations
- Create learning that is active, collaborative and fosters learning relationships

According to Corsling⁸, "Student Centered Learning conceives of students as playing a more active role in their learning processes. Active learning is often associated with experiential, problem-based and project-based learning and other forms of collaborative learning and less reliance on the large lecture format."

The Objectives of the Study

The purpose of the study is to understand how the students in higher education respond to student centric learning and to learn about the issues and challenges to be addressed in University system of education. Some of the specific objectives are:

To know the issues and challenges to incorporate student centric learning

To understand the preparations required to run student centric classes

To learn about student engagement

To visualize the benefits of student centric classes and student engagement

The Issues and Challenges for Student Centric Learning

This study is about the efforts to bring out the Student Centric Learning Process in the institute through Student Engagements. It is felt that interactive as opposed to didactic teaching improves the academic success and promotes the inclusion of learners who

otherwise might remain a outsider. In order to make it Student Centric, a few changes in the Academic Program were necessary as the existing system is examination driven. The institute is privileged with Autonomous State under a Technological University. The systems and procedures of the University for Autonomous Institutes permit to conduct Seminar like courses wherein students need not have the Semester End Examinations. The institute capitalized on this provision and identified and offered one course as Seminar Course, on experimental basis. The faculty in charge of this course was given the freedom to develop the curriculum, make the changes in the pedagogy, use external help wherever required and develop an evaluation system. The purpose is to encourage students to actively participate during the conduct of the course. In order to accommodate this change, the Examination Authorities permitted to evaluate this 3 credit course by the faculty, a deviation from the normal practice of Semester End Examinations and double evaluation, one by the faculty in charge of the course and the other by the external evaluator recommended by the Examination Authorities. The syllabus for the course was revisited by the faculty and a few changes to accommodate the latest updates were incorporated in the course. The course delivery method was changed to 14 sessions of 2 contact hours each and 14 sessions of one contact hour duration complying with 42 contact hours for the course delivery. The course delivery was facilitated with the use of the Learning Management System (LMS). All the students registered to the course in this LMS and students were given a unique ID and password to access his/her page in the LMS. Further, the course content included hands on training on Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP), an additional component offered as part of the course.

Student Engagement Process

In the very first class, the faculty in charge announced about the change, particularly about not having the Semester End Examination for the course. The students wholeheartedly welcomed this change and this worked well towards bringing them closer to the student centeredness. The Lesson Plan of the course offered was shared with the

students and evaluation pattern of the course was clearly explained in the very first class. The seating arrangement in the classroom required a change so that student groups sit together and discuss the subject matter freely among the peers. However, this was a limitation as classrooms were designed for lecture mode of teaching. The seating arrangement in the class was rearranged by forming 10 groups of 6 students each, on a class strength of 60. This grouping is done in such a way that students' group is comfortable with the group members. The students occupied the seats according to the Group Number identified by the faculty in charge. The students were registered in the LMS both on the basis of Semester in which they were studying and the Group Number.

This change in the seating arrangement and use of LMS helped in creating belongingness among the students. The classroom activities were encouraged as a group activity. In each session, the debate and discussions among group members were encouraged instead of lecturing mode of class. With the permission of the faculty in charge, students were allowed to access internet and gather related information/data. Students were encouraged to probe into specifics of the subject matter and this resulted in switching to learning mode in the class. In the process, students were seeking more information by enquiring. During such interventions, other students too participated in the discussion rather than the teacher alone responding to the question. In addition to this, provocative questions from the faculty stimulated the students to participate in debates and discussions in the class and later on a Forum, a feature available in the LMS. Generally, initiated by the faculty but open to any member to initiate the debate, group discussions on the subject related matter was carried out in the Forum and students discussed freely on the topic and the faculty intervene, time to time, to steer the debate in the right direction. This helped students to know 'What' and 'How' of the subject and more importantly reflect on the topics discussed. The discussions led to real time issues. The LMS is also used to give instructions to the students, to share the learning materials, to announce the assignments, test dates,

quiz dates etc. The assignments were uploaded to LMS by the students within the due date and these assignments were evaluated or returned to the students to correct and resubmit using LMS (need based). The quizzes and surveys were also carried out using LMS. All these technology supported activities helped the students to remain engaged with the subject beyond the classroom. It was found that majority of the students were active on LMS late in the evening and night time. The activities through LMS were incentivised with 40 percent of the course evaluation accounting for these activities. In order to be fair to performing students in the group activities, peer evaluation was introduced. This created an environment for appreciative learning where the good work done by the peer member of the group were recognized by other members. The results of the quiz, assignment, test, etc. were displayed in the LMS without any delay, sometimes immediately after the submission. In addition to this, the course also had another component, ERP training.

ERP Training: Student Centric Learning

Training students on ERP concepts in B-Schools has been in practice. There are several studies available on its practice and benefits. For example, the study "Integrating ERP across the Curriculum: A phased III Tier approach" by Springer⁹ concluded that the course goals may range from simple exposure to cross-functional integration of ERP. Once established into the curricular framework, ERP offers a base which is readily scalable. In another Study on this subject by MacKinnon¹⁰ lists the benefits of integrating ERP into the curriculum.

The real challenge was teaching ERP versus promoting student centric learning through student engagements both in the class and outside the class. The challenge was to create an environment for peer to peer sharing of materials, self learning and taking the subject matter beyond the classroom. As the institute believes in continuous improvement in teaching – learning process, new methods were attempted to enhance student centric learning. The institute values the feedback from alumni members on the updates required in academic program to meet or exceed industry expectations. In order to facilitate

this, anyone of the alumni is made the member of Board of Studies of the institute. One such feedback from this Board member was about limitations of digital skills by the graduates of the institute at the time of recruitment. This was instrumental in deciding to train the students on basic ERP concepts. This training required trainers with field expertise and therefore, the institute associated with a vendor to impart the training. This training had 72 hours of both classroom sessions and hands on. But the feedback received after the completion of the training was not very encouraging as the students could not connect themselves with the topics discussed by the trainer and purpose of this training in the MBA program. The institute felt the training needs but how to incorporate this into the academic program in a way that students appreciate this was the challenge to be addressed. A brainstorming session on ERP training for the following batch of students in the faculty meeting led to the emergence of the following:

- ✓ The ERP training should enable students to connect with the concepts learnt in the classroom
- ✓ The training should not burden them academically but should motivate them to work on it irrespective of class hours
- ✓ The training should be more of a hands on experience and less of classroom teaching
- ✓ The training should be free from examination pressures or rote memorization

A change in teaching and learning process was needed to make this training appreciated by the students. All the students should get an insight to the subject and visualize its importance in the program. The possibility of using open source materials was explored. With the external help, open source ERP training was introduced to the course. A two day training program was conducted emphasising on relating the ERP to the MBA courses. Also, students were guided on how to access the open source ERP and use basic modules of the package. Further, the training program had limited theoretical concepts and more activity components. The focus of the training was to make the students to understand how to simulate a few transactions using open source ERP package.

After the initial orientation, students started to work on the ERP package independently. A trial run was done during the class hours by each of the groups. Subsequently, a few students volunteered to learn and practice different modules of the ERP. The quick learners showed more interest and volunteered to experiment with the modules of the ERP. With the help of the faculty coordinator, these volunteers experimented on Open Source ERP modules and realised the relationship between the ERP and courses in the MBA program. They configured different modules in ERP package and visualised the interrelationship between the modules. The concepts like generating leads, converting leads into prospects, preparing quotation, converting it into a sales order, stock verification, payment terms, warehousing, purchasing, creation of vendors/suppliers, ledger entry, authentication etc. were experimented by these volunteers. These students who had volunteered to learn ERP concepts on their own turned out to be the Voluntary Triggers for Viral learning of the ERP among the students. These Voluntary Triggers created small business transactions such as sales activity, purchase activity, warehousing, accounting etc. and visualised how these activities are interconnected and data entered in one module reflect on the other. The transactions created by the Voluntary Triggers were demonstrated to other students in the classroom with such confidence and integrity that it aroused interest in all the students. The success motivated these Voluntary Triggers and each one of them volunteered to train other students in the group/class. The trained students taught another student or group of students to learn the ERP modules. This model of Peer to Peer Teaching and Learning spread wide among all the students in the class. The entire class with student strength of 161 successfully learnt the ERP applications using the Open Source package on their own. This activity was part of the academic program and student performance was evaluated. Here each student was asked to demonstrate a transaction with constraints applied.

Learning from the Student Centric Classes

The students shared their experience of this teaching and learning process in a Poll using the LMS. In this

Poll, the response of 49 percent of the students was that using the technology (Open Source ERP) made learning process simple and another 40 percent felt that ERP training helped them to understand the management concepts better.

Students acknowledged the benefit of peer to peer teaching and learning process. While sharing the class experiences on this particular course, students explicitly mentioned the benefits of ERP training and method adopted to impart this training. This is a complete reversal of the perception of ERP learning of the very previous batch.

Some of the observations and outcome from this student centric teaching learning process are good learning experience. They are as follows:

Activity based classes helped the students to 'open up' both within and outside class and this in turn resulted in sharing of the knowledge among the peer learners.

The group formation helped to share one's views and thoughts freely among the peer learners and also encouraged debates and discussions on the subject matter beyond the classroom.

It is evident that student centric learning process created interest in the course offered and this in turn triggered the students' mind for further reading/learning. It can be concluded that the students who are engaged, deriving meaning and understanding from their studies, demonstrate a deep approach to learning. These students are more likely to continue their learning process.

The students volunteered to self learning and also propagated this among the peer students.

Teachers' role shifted to mentoring the students or student groups from teaching materials from standard text book, preparing question papers, evaluating answer scripts, etc.

The students were relieved from the examination pressures and hence the purpose of learning is redefined.

Finally, it emerged from the student feedback and classroom experiences that the student centric

learning helped students to internalise the understanding of the subject. It made them to learn more than rote memorization and managing examination pressures.

Limitations and Scope for Further Study

The LMS is dependent on the access to good internet facility. Hence, it is essential to have a good IT infrastructure before implementing this system in every class.

The classroom design should be changed from 'lecture hall' type to "round tabled hall" with provisions for "small group activities" for the students and free walkway for teacher to reach the student groups.

While certain groups perform exceedingly well there is a chance of a few groups falling behind. However, teacher can identify such groups and handhold them.

Getting the right external resource persons with relevant field experience and interest to teach in a manner that meets the students' expectations is a challenge.

The teacher should be willing to experiment and agree to change the role.

There is enough scope for further studies on this subject. It is possible to measure the student outcome with the use of rubrics for a specific activity. This brings out a high level of transparency and students and other stakeholders can work together to meet or exceed program expectations. Another area of interest would be on adopting new technologies to the learning process and making it student driven. Further, collecting and analysing data on student performance over a few batches would help to analyze the effect of student centric learning on student outcome.

References

1. Wright., & Gloria Brown. (2011). Student-Centered Learning in Higher Education. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 23(3), 92-97. Retrieved from <http://www.isetl.org/ijthe/> ISSN 1812-9129
2. Weimer, M. (2002). *Learner-centered teaching: Five key changes to practice*, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

3. Kuh, G. (2001). The national survey of student engagement: Conceptual framework and overview of psychometric properties. Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research and Planning. Retrieved from http://nsse.iub.edu/pdf/conceptual_framework_2003.pdf
4. Umbach, P. D., & Wawrzynski, M. R. (2005). Faculty do matter: The role of college faculty in student learning and engagement. *Research in Higher Education*, 46(2), 153–84.
5. Chapman, E. (2013). Alternative Approaches to Assessing Student Engagement Rates. *Practical Assessment Research & Evaluation*, 8(13).
6. ACER, *Attracting, engaging and retaining: New conversations about learning*. Australasian student engagement report. Australian Council for Educational Research., 2008, Camberwell, Victoria.
7. Nick, Z., & Linda, L. (2010). Improving Student engagement: Ten Proposals for action. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 11(3), 167–177. DOI: 10.1177/1469787410379680
8. Corsling., Glenda., Heagney., Margaret., Thomas., & Liz. (2009). Improving Student Retention in Hgher Education-Improving Teaching and Learning. *Australian Universities Review*, 51(2), 9–18.
9. Springer, M. C., Ross, S. C. (2007). Humann Nate, "Integrating ERP cross the curriculum,: A phased three tiered approach. *Issues in Information Systems*, 8(1), 84–90
10. MacKinnon, R. (2002). Integration of ERP in the Business Curriculum. *IACIS*, 413–419.