

Factors Contributing to Persistence of Teacher Centered Learning in the Higher Educational Sector of Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

A modern-day classroom does not require the physical existence of a teacher or students. Learning can be done within an entirely virtual environment. This is in contrast to the traditional environment of learning where the teacher was the epicenter of attention. Higher education is a sector where most students thrive to strike a balance between obtaining one or more qualification and professional experience at the same time which make their lives hectic. Hence modern methods of leaning have proven to be more convenient and effective. However in Sri Lankan higher education sector, still the traditional teacher centered learning environment is preferred over the student centered learning environment where there is more active involvement of the students. This study aims to understand the factors which influence persistence in the teacher centered learning in the higher education sector of Sri Lanka despite the emerging trend of combining learning with modern technology and making students the core of attention in the learning environment. Among such factors the lack of awareness, resources, technological proficiency, motivation as well as cultural misconceptions are highlighted. The study concludes with recommendations for the educational policy makers and researchers who are further involved in this research area.

KEYWORDS: Student Centered Learning, Persistence of Teacher Centered Learning, Higher Education

INTRODUCTION

Making rational decisions is what helps the humans to travel through the journey of life. In order to do so the human mind should be empowered through education. Each individual being nourished by education leads to the nourishment of an entire nation which is a collaborative development of the economy, society and culture. Once an individual completes his/her secondary education in high school, if he/she pursues a path in Higher Education; the next stop would be an academic body that awards degrees, diplomas, etc. Also known as Tertiary Education, higher education includes both under-graduate and post-graduate studies. This study is limited to the geographical scope of Sri Lanka. The participants of the study are students in the higher educational sector of Sri Lanka attending to both state and private higher educational institutions.

BACKGROUND

A Sri Lankan spends 13.97 years on an average in the education system from Primary to Tertiary education. However in developed nations such as Australia a student spends an average of 20.43 years. By 2010, only 8.51% of the entire population of Sri Lanka had completed their tertiary education (World Bank EdStats, 2015). These are indications that show how education is associated with the development of a nation. It can be observed that Sri Lanka is still far behind in these terms when compared to the developed nations.

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The primary driver of education is learning. Learning is grasping knowledge. Knowledge can be grasped through self-study, teaching or personal experience. Learning has to be effective. The learner is challenged to grow self-reliantly by effective learning (Muijs and Reynolds, 2005).

Passive learning does not seem the most appropriate method of learning for students in the higher education sector as their learning will not be completely effective if is being poured to them by the teacher in a traditional classroom. Studies have proven that learning becomes more effective when the learners are in control of what they learn rather being controlled in a teacher centered classroom setting (Al-Saadi, 2011).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND OBJECTIVES

This study aims to address the following questions.

1. How much are the students aware of the concepts of teacher centered and student centered learning approaches?
2. What is the present status of the student centered learning approach in the higher educational sector of Sri Lanka?
3. What factors influence the persistence of teacher centered approach to learning?

Following are the objectives of this study.

1. To understand the extent of awareness of the students in the higher educational sector of Sri Lanka about the student centered learning concept.
2. To inspect the current position of student centered learning in higher education institutes of Sri Lanka.
3. To study the factors that influence the persistence of teacher centered learning which would also define the barriers to implement student centered learning in the higher educational sector of Sri Lanka.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The topic of this study bears immense significance to teachers, students, educational policy makers and the entire nation. At present it is affirmed by many higher educational institutes that they entirely use the student centered learning approach. However practically this does not seem to be correct. The findings of this study will help learners as well as teachers to understand the concepts of teacher centered and student centered learning with an evaluation of both approaches. The study will thereafter help to gradually adopt the more effective approach to learning. Educational policy makers who are involved in preparing the educational curriculums will also benefit from the study as they will be able to identify the best methods of effective learning for the students and examine the constraints that hinder the complete application of a student centered learning culture. The present business world seeks critical thinkers which is expected as a core requirement at organizations (Burbach, Courtney et al, 2010). Hence there is more demand for graduates who retain such skills when getting hired (Bandyopadhyay, Subir et al, 2018). Such skills will be developed only when the students are responsible for their own learning. A nation consisting well educated individuals will result in the development of the entire society. Hence the findings of this study will also benefit the society at large.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Theories of Learning

Acquisition of learning has been explained by different theories throughout the past. Learning theories of cognition have been used in this study as a theoretical framework to elaborate different ways of learning. Classical Conditioning is a theory which describes learning as a habitual response. Such response is generated unintentionally. This is considered as a part of the behavioral view of learning (Mackintosh, 1980). For an example when the teacher enters the classroom the students tend to stand up and greet out of habit although the teacher may not have come to conduct a lesson. This type of learning is closely related to the teacher centered learning environment.

Another theory which is in line with the teacher centered learning approach would be Observational Learning. According to this theory the students learn by observing what being demonstrated by the teacher in the classroom (Vostroknutov, Polonio and Coricelli, 2017). In simple terms it is 'Imitation'. Habituation Learning is another theory of the same category where students learn through repetition. However this might result in boredom of students and make them demotivated to be actively involved in the learning process. Their response to the teacher in the classroom could decline as a result of monotonous teaching (Thiel, Huston and Schwarting, 1998).

Therefore the teacher will have to change the teaching style to keep them engaged. Rote Learning is another theory where students touch the outer layer of a topic without digging deeper for better understanding (Vinacke, 1959). This type of learning imprisons the learner in a very limited scope which is what can be observed in the teacher centered learning environment.

When looking at the theories that are closely associated with the student centered learning environment, Operant Conditioning is where students are challenged to an extent where they finally learn from their own errors (Mackintosh, 1980). The theory of Enculturation encourages learners to learn from the culture in which they live and associate with (Kyshtymova, 2014). Various aspects of the culture can be learnt by associating with different learners coming from different cultural backgrounds in a student centered learning environment where there is more engagement among the students. Learning does not only come from text books or what is being taught by a teacher in a classroom. There are many other informal sources of knowledge in the world. This is explained by the theory of Informal Learning. This type of learning mainly comprises of learning through day to day experiences (Cox, 2012).

B. Effective Learning

Learning is deemed to be effective when the learner is actively involved in the learning. There are four perspectives of learning that explain the engagement of a student in the process of learning. Behavioral perspective explains the behavior of the student whereas the Psychological perspective explains the emotional side of the student. The student's attitude towards society and the culture is explained by the Socio-cultural perspective. A holistic view of the student engagement is explained by the Holistic perspective (Kahu, 2013).

The learning process for the students should be a wholesome experience where they stay motivated and active throughout. Traditional belief of learning was that it has to be in passive form with utmost obedience and respect to the teacher who played the main role in the classroom. However modern views on learning claim that learners should be in control of what they learn. The learning process is defined as a four-phased cycle according to Dennison and Kirk. Do; means the learning exercise whereas Review; means reflection, Learn: Pulling out the core understanding from the reflection and Act; putting the learning into use. Effective learning is not being spoon fed by the teacher in a typical classroom but it is being responsible for your own learning and making the maximum use of your learning. Basically it is known as "Learning how to learn" (Claxton, Nisbet and Shucksmith, 1987).

C. Student Centered Learning

In this environment the role of the teacher is different to what is in a teacher centered learning environment. The teacher becomes a mentor or a coach for the students who are actively involved in their learning process. As a result of monotonous teaching styles and memorizing of text books, a need for a change was arisen in the traditional classroom. This is when the student centered learning approach was evolved. The difference between the two learning environments was explained by using a few differentiators in a study conducted by Pedersen and Liu in 2003.

Feature	Student Centered Learning	Teacher Centered Learning
Goal of activity	To provide a response to a central question where students have ownership over their learning	To provide a response to a question set by the teacher
Role of the teacher	The teacher provides the case or issue for which the students will develop the answer. The teacher will act as a facilitator	The teacher acts as an instructor
Method of assessment	Open ended assessments which focus on learning rather than grades	The teacher assesses the students and determine grades to motivate students
Interaction	Students engage with peers and learn collaboratively	Teacher directs the students

Table 01: Differences between student centered and teacher centered learning, Pedersen & Liu, 2003

Types of learning in the student centered learning environment are mainly active learning where students use modern technology and resources to acquire knowledge on their own, collaborative learning where students work in groups, inquiry based learning where students learn by asking questions and project based learning where students are given the responsibility of driving a project and learning through the experience. In this type of learning environment the students are challenged to construct their own learning (Huba & Freed, 2000). Raising questions in the classroom triggers the ability to think critically. By measuring the active involvement of the students in the classroom the quality of the learning is indicated (Zohrabi, et al., 2012).

D. Teacher Centered Learning and Persistence

However much the student centered learning environment is praised at present, it can be observed that there is still persistence of the teacher centered learning environment at majority of higher educational institutions. In such an environment the teacher is the main source of information (Ameliana, 2017). The teacher is in charge of the entire learning process as well as the evaluation of the students. The students are mere listeners in the classroom (Makeeva, 2017). This environment is criticized by many modern educationalists. Mainly due to reasons such as the monotonous teaching style of the teacher which may not be the best style for the students, the lack of interest in students to actively engage due to not being given the chance of learn by raising questions or expressing views and also due to the lack of individual attention in the classroom where there are certain students who are slow learners.

A study showed that still the teacher centered learning methods are preferred when learning language subjects (Liu et al, 2006). A survey conducted by Shipton (2011) in the New South Wales Police College showed that although a majority of the respondents seem to show a positive attitude towards the student centered learning environment, still the teacher centered methods are in practice. A contradictory view was shown in the study conducted by Ervin (2012), which showed that although the associate degree nursing faculty at Kettering College was using the student centered learning approaches, a major portion of the respondents responded that they still prefer the teacher centered learning approach.

This raises an important question as to why students still prefer this traditional setting of learning when educational institutes are certainly trying to adapt into the modern methods of learning. This is where the findings of studies show certain factors that influence the persistence of teacher centered learning or in other words the factors that act as barriers to completely transform into a student centered learning environment (Ahmad, 2016).

The student centered learning approach is still an emerging concept which has not come to the limelight of the educational system yet. Therefore not only students but also some teachers are still not completely aware of the modern teaching techniques.

Some students still lack the required confidence to actively engage in the classroom. No matter how modernized the world is, certain conservative cultural misconceptions still exist which act as constraints to popularize the modern learning methods. Insufficient resources and technological proficiency are also reasons for developing countries like Sri Lanka for not being able to completely modernize the learning environment.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research is a quantitative study which used a survey that was circulated among a sample of learners in the higher educational sector in Sri Lanka. These learners include both undergraduates and postgraduates of state and private higher educational institutions which is the target population of the survey. The study uses quantifiable data to arrive at conclusions. The questionnaire was developed based on previous studies (Admad, 2016, Fesshaye & Tekle, 2017, Navaz, 2014) with certain improvisations to a mix of research questions. The survey was accessible by the respondents through the shared link which was emailed. The data was collected and then analyzed through a statistical data analysis software named SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) to determine the relationship between the following defined variables.

Factor	Explanation	Independent Variable	Dependent Variables
Awareness	Whether the students are aware of the student centered learning concept and the benefits which can be obtained.	1. Understandings of the role of the teacher. 2. Importance of Expressing the student's opinions in class.	1. Awareness of the difference between student centered and teacher centered learning concepts. 2. Awareness of the difference between student centered and teacher centered learning concepts.
Technological Proficiency	Whether the students have the appropriate technological skills and whether adequate training is being provided from their higher educational institute.	Adequacy of the training provided by their higher education institute.	Confidence to use technology for learning.
Availability of Resources	Whether adequate resources such as the latest electronic equipment, digital library facilities and software packages are available to implement the student centered approach.	Availability of a digital library	Student's confidence to carry out self-studies.

Table 02: Variables, Author Constructed

The author has collected primary data through the circulated survey and secondary data by referring to existing empirical research, books, journals and web-based resources. The author has chosen the deductive approach to research where existing theories have been studied to arrive at conclusions. The shared link to the survey was initially emailed to 25 undergraduates and 25 postgraduates from the Western Province of Sri Lanka due to the convenience of the author. Thereafter through referrals sampling approach the survey reached 100 participants from each category. The total number of responses received for the survey was 117.

Item	Count	Percentage
Sample size of participants	200	100%
Completed number of surveys compared to sample size	117	58.5%

Table 03: Survey Responses, Author Constructed

DISCUSSION

First a demographic analysis was carried out based on the responses of the survey. A majority of 64.1% out of the respondents were within between the ages from 26 to 35. Majority of the respondents are females which was a percentage of 57.3%. As per the statistics of the University Grants Commission of Sri Lanka, the majority of students engaged in higher education are females which was 63% as of 2018. The enrolment for post graduate studies in Sri Lanka is at a low rate of 8.79% (UGC, 2018). However majority that responded to the survey were postgraduates (56.4%). A rising popularity can be observed amongst Sri Lankans relating to the private universities. Majority of the respondents of the survey were also from private universities (59.8%).

One of the key highlights of the responses in terms of the employment status of the participants was that 76.9% were under full employment. Students who attend private universities have the flexibility of working full time by carrying out studies part time where as in state universities this is quite the opposite. However both instances prove that students in the higher educational sector are in some sort of employment hence they cannot entirely depend on the teacher in the classroom.

The next section of the survey tested the expectations on learning outcomes by using certain factors based on a previous study by Feshaye & Tekle (2017). The students were requested to rank the following outcomes from most important to least important based on a likert scale.

- Acquiring knowledge and skills while being a critical thinker
- Learning through innovation, practice and research
- Peer based learning
- Passing exams just by memorization

As per the ranking of the students, it was evident that they mostly prefer to acquire knowledge and skills while expanding their critical thinking abilities (42.7%) and to learn through innovation, practice and research (34.2%); which is only possible in a student centered learning environment. 61.5% students ranked passing exams just by memorization as the least important expected outcome in learning. Next part of the survey was intended to understand the current position of student centered learning in higher

educational institutions. Out of the total number of respondents only 18.8% said that student centered learning environment exists in its full form in their respective institutions. 66.7% said that it is practiced only to some extent. Highest mean score in terms of the currently practiced method of learning was given to 'Lectures' which proves to the fact that there is persistence of teacher centered learning. In Sri Lanka, the student to teacher ratio is very high which was seconded by the response of only 1.7% of the respondents saying that there are less than 10 students in one class room. 47% said that there are more than 40 students in a class room which indicates difficulty in practicing student centered learning completely. The next section of the survey requested the participants to select out of the following list of challenges in implementing the student centered learning environment in their classrooms by agreeing to what they observe in their classrooms.

Challenge	No of Participants who agreed	Response Rate
Students are not familiar with this approach from school days	73	62.3%
Lack of awareness by students	58	49.6%
High number of students in class	46	39.3%
Fear of approaching lecturers	44	37.6%
Method of assessment	41	35.0%
Fear of responsibility	40	34.2%
Lack of resources	39	33.3%
Lack of technological proficiency	36	30.8%
Lack of awareness by lecturers	32	27.4%

Table 04: Challenges of implementing/ practicing the student centered learning approach

According to the responses it can be seen that lack of awareness by students is the biggest reason amongst many others which can be indicated as challenges to transform in a student centered learning environment.

In support of the mentioned argument that there is still teacher centered learning environment present in the higher educational sector in Sri Lanka, the following alternate hypotheses were tested, analyzed and accepted based on the responses of the survey by using *Spearman's rho* where the corresponding *p* value was less than the specified significance level $p < 0.01$ in all these cases.

H1: There is a correlation between the understanding of a teacher's role in a classroom and the awareness of student centered and teacher centered learning environments.

H2: There is a correlation between the ability to express a student's opinion in class and the awareness of student centered and teacher centered learning environments.

H3: There is a correlation between the student's confidence in using modern technology for learning and the sufficiency of the relevant technical training provided by higher educational institutes.

H4: There is a correlation between the student's self-assurance to carry out studies on their own and the provision of digital resources such as a digital library by the higher education institute.

CONCLUSION

The primary objective of this study was to identify the reasons for persistence of the teacher centered learning environment in the higher educational sector of Sri Lanka. It was found out through existing empirical studies that although both the government as well as the private institutions have taken necessary steps to adopt the student centered learning environment; there is still persistence of a teacher centered learning environment. A complete transformation of the traditional classroom setting is yet to take place. It came to the attention of the researcher that there are still a number of students who are not completely aware of the difference between these two learning approaches which acts as a barrier. By analyzing the responses of the survey it was also indicated that only a minority of higher educational institutions completely use student centered learning. Although there is preference to study in a student centered learning environment, lack of resources and the required technological proficiency also act as constraints. Some students lack the confidence in carrying out their studies alone and to take responsibility of their own learning. Certain cultural misconceptions also act as constraints. According to the responses of the students the teacher is still in charge of the learning activity as 'Lectures' is the most practiced method of being taught in their institutions. According to these findings the study has found some evidence to support the fact that there is persistence of teacher centered learning in the higher educational sector in Sri Lanka.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The government of Sri Lanka is continuously extending efforts to develop skills of the students in the higher educational sector by introducing many programs and latest technology. These skills can be developed when the students are actively engaged in the learning activity and as explained throughout the study this is possible in a student centered learning environment. The author recommends to carry out more awareness sessions in state as well as private higher educational institutions explaining the positive impact of the student centered learning environment. It is also recommended to conduct these awareness sessions not only for the students but also for the teachers who may still be limited to their preferred teaching styles. It is recommended that educational policy makers find more ways of incorporating student centered learning techniques such as team work and project based activities in the educational curriculum. Author also recommends that government introduces more new technology and resources such as digital libraries. Provision of electronic devices such as smart phones and tabs to underprivileged students may also help them in actively engaging in their studies. It will be beneficial if the government provides adequate training to teachers and allocate more teachers to universities to reduce the student to teacher ratio. Author recommends a change in the current methods of assessing students in both state as well as private institutions where methods such as peer to peer evaluation and self-evaluation can be used which encourages student centered learning. Since lack of confidence is a barrier for students to carry out self-studies, it is also

recommended that students are provided with confidence building workshops in addition to their day to day studies.

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