Utilizing Student Centered Seminars as a Student Centered Independent Learning Tool to Develop Transferable Skills in Students

Conference Paper · January 2014

1 author:

Nuradhi Jayasiri
University of Otago
8 PUBLICATIONS   **18** CITATIONS

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:

Project   Reading for PhD, on Integrated reporting, University of Otago, New Zealand View project

Utilizing Student Centered Seminars as a Student Centered Independent Learning Tool to Develop Transferable Skills in Students

Nuradhi K. Jayasiri
Department of Accounting, Faculty of Mnagamenet & Finance, University of Colombo
nuradhi@gmail.com

Introduction

Universities are expected to produce qualified graduates well equipped with knowledge, skills and attitudes. Knowledge is generated and shared through multiple disciplines in Universities. Skills would be many and vary. Skills development among students is timely important. Personal qualities and skills of students are the only selection criteria used by employers. Students need to be able to identify their personal skills and qualities, assess how well students can demonstrate them, determine how students can enhance those skills before they graduate, and communicate those skills to employers. In the process of distinguishing and selecting undergraduates for employment, employers take a keen interest in the personal qualities and personal skills of graduates, who will then be potential candidates.

In a conventional teaching environment which types of skills and how those skills could be developed and transferred in students would be doubtful. Gibbs and Habeshaw (1989) pointed out:

> "There has been extensive research on the effectiveness of the lecture as a teaching method which has shown that; Lectures are as effective at conveying factual information as other methods, but not more so…Lectures are a very poor means of changing attitudes, inspiring students or inducing positive or professional attitudes towards the subject…" (p.44).

This study adopts a new method to change the conventional teaching and learning approaches which consist of lectures, assignments and examinations. The change resulted in the change of learning approaches of students from conventional learning methods to student centered independent learning approach; Student centered seminar.

Students learn well when they take responsibility for their learning (Gibbs & Habeshaw, 1989). Gibbs and Habeshaw (1989) further stated:

> "Effective learners are autonomous: learners make their own decisions about how, when and what to learn rather than passively following general advice" (p.176).

In improving transferable skills, Gibbs (1995) stated that:

> "Teamwork can involve a wide range of transferable skills, and team projects are an ideal vehicle for building the demnd for the use of skills into learning tasks. Team projects can involve leadership, interpersonal skills, negotiation, oral and written communication, time and task management, research and information skills, chairing meetings and almost any other skill you want to build in" (p.5).

Accordingly, based on the background, the researcher was interested to carry on a research, which would raise the research issue as: *what types of transferrable skills would be developed among students through the student centered seminar series?*

The research issue is comprehensively addressed through answering the following research questions:
- *How the student centered seminar series were carried out?*
- *What types of transferable skills were expected to develop among students?*
- *What were the methods used to assess the types of transferable skills developed through the students centered seminar series?*

The broader purpose of the study is to get a deep understanding about the research issue. Following are the narrowed down objectives of this study:
- *To gain an understanding on the different types of transferrable skills which were expected to develop among students*

- *To explore the impact of students centered seminar on students' transferable skills*

Methodology
For this study, the sample size comprised of 50 students who were in their third year of study in the department of accounting. Total 50 students were grouped into five teams with ten students each.

Seminar sessions were scheduled for three hours for the third year accounting subject, 'Financial Reporting and Regulations'. With the approval of the head of the department, resource personnel were contacted from a well reputed organization in the field of accounting. Students' role was key in the seminar series. In organizing sessions, students had to decide on the layout of the lecture room as per the requirements of the resource person, deliver the welcome speech and vote of thanks, arranging resource materials, and handle the technical matters. At the end of each session students were required to write an individual summary report to the given topic on that particular day, capturing most relevant and important things shared in the seminar, in a single side of A4 page. Students were given 20 minutes for that essay writing.

From students' total continuous assessment (CA) marks of 30%, they were given marks for their attendance for the seminars, organizing the event and for the five summary reports, a total of 20% marks were allocated. Gibbs and Habeshaw (1989) identified that students are driven by assessments and assessing ongoing learning is letting students in on the act. That study further stated:
> "To a considerable extent students get more out of learning tasks when they are fully involved in them…" (p.37).

Data or student feedback was collected using the triangulation method. As one method of triangulation this study used an open ended questionnaire. Through open ended questionnaires, data was collected at the end of the five seminar series. If data was collected at the end of each seminar, since students had a chance of getting to know the content of the questionnaire from other groups, the researcher collected data at the end of seminar series.
The other method used in triangulation was the discussion with group of students who engaged in organizing the session in each day.

Third method of collecting students' feedback was the summary report written by students at the end of each seminar session. Summary reports were in accordance with the 'Fifteen minute essay' as pointed out by Biggs and Tang (2007).

Results

In this study, students centered seminar was used as skills targeted teaching, learning and assessment method.

Data analysis tools were descriptive coding and secondary grouping. Data collected through open ended questionnaires was first analyzed using the descriptive coding method. 48 student feed back out of 50, was dealt separately during the descriptive coding stage. Descriptively coded data was then secondarily clustered into group skills. Group skills have been identified as specific skills such as communication skills, teamwork skills, interpersonal skills, managing and organizing skills, problem solving skills and technical skills.

Table 1: *Types of specific skills*

Type of specific skill	What is expected to develop among students
Communication skills	Ability to develop and deliver effective, informative and persuasive oral presentations
Team working skills	ability to operate effectively as a member of a team in completing tasks, solving problems or working towards agreed goals. Students could develop cooperation skills through: facilitating, trusting, accepting differences, contributing, sharing tasks, collaborating
Interpersonal skills	ability to work with different people and in different teams, and the ability to adapt to changing working environments and students' dress sense, personal grooming and business etiquette
Managing and Organizing skills	ability to plan and devise a timetable for action and carry these out systematically for group purposes
Problem solving skills	ability to identify, analyze, and describe a problem or group of problems, to consider the context and impact of the problem, to apply knowledge in proposing and reviewing various solutions, decide on the most appropriate ones
Technical skills	ability to write technical manuals, documents and reports and students' computer literacy

Source: Based on Mendis (2008) and MaTE course materials

Data collected using the discussions with particular group of students revealed how important the seminar series was in participation and organization, and more importantly, how the seminar series helped them to be active with the new experience which was beyond the conventional lectures.

Despite the triangulation method used to collect data, the researcher could observe that students were engaged in organizing the seminar and managing their own time and examine students' behavior, how they interestingly involved in seminar session and more importantly how students

took the responsibility for their learning and for the tasks assigned. Further, the researcher could observe and identify that students are tend to self-monitor themselves and their learning through this change. Biggs and Tang (2007) stated, when self-monitoring, learners keep a watching brief over their learning: How am I doing? Am I making mistakes here? If so, what is it and how can I avoid it in future? Is there any way I can approach this more effectively than I am now? With student centered seminars, the researcher has been able to engage students in active participation, active learning and self-monitoring in their learning.

Cumulative record of summary reports gave a very good, and quick, indication of the development of students, thinking through the course. This in turn would lead to develop students' ability to critical thinking, analyzing and problem solving skills.

In students' final examination, the final examination paper was included case studies, problem situation where students needed to apply relevant subject matters and practical aspects discussed in the seminars, and lecture discussions. When evaluating their answers the researcher analyzed how students have showed evidence on how students arrived the problem situation, how students developed the possible solutions, what was unique in their scenario, and to what extent students are successful in bringing the practical elements discussed through the seminars in to the subject matters.

Discussion and Conclusion

Student centered seminars involved, giving students greater responsibility for their own learning, so that students have the fullest opportunities for active involvement being challenged to think through for themselves, to identify and tackle problems, and to share and discuss ideas with others. Active learning also puts a high priority on the skills students need to acquire or to refine in order to make use of what students know. Therefore, students centered seminars have paid greater attention to improve widely applicable or transferrable skills of students, which include the following; problem solving skills, skills in applying concepts and principles in analyzing problems, creative and critical thinking skills, showing greater self-confidence, taking responsibility for one's own development, working co-operatively with others in a group or team, leading and organizing group activity and communication skills. Students who had a secure grounding in transferrable skills will be better able to deploy and extend these in a variety of professional and social settings.

References

Biggs, J. & Tang, C. (2007). *Teaching for Quality Learning at University* (3rd ed.). Maidenhead: SRHE/Open University Press.

Gibbs, G., Habeshaw, S., & Habeshaw, T. (1989). *53 Interesting Ways of Helping Your Students To Study* (2nd ed.). Technical and Educational Services, Bristol, UK

Gibbs, G. & Habeshaw, T. (1989). *Preparing to Teach.* Bristol: Technical and Educational Services.

Gibbs, G. (1995). *Learning in Teams: A Tutor Guide*. Oxford Brookes University.

Mendis, L. (2008, July). Using Teaching to Expand Range of Skill Development in Students and Staff. Paper presented at the Staff Development Center (SDC)-Sri Lanka Association for Improving Higher Education Effectiveness (SLAIHEE) Fourth Annual Conference, Sri Lanka