

Application of Learner Centred Pedagogy in a Postgraduate Taught Course: A Sri Lankan Case Study

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Abstract: *The use of traditional teaching methods has received criticism for not creating an environment in the classroom to develop critical thinking and problem solving skills. For that reason, there has been a shift of the pedagogy from teacher-centeredness to student-centeredness in teaching-learning process. This study presents the experiences of participants and facilitators in a Sri Lankan Postgraduate class where Learner Centered Teaching (LCT) approach was adopted. Sri Lankan education system is still identified with a dominant 'teacher-centeredness' pedagogy. The study aims to explore the extent to which learner-centred pedagogy can foster voluntary participation in a postgraduate taught course. Ontologically the study can be placed within the interpretivist paradigm and adopted qualitative methodology. Reflections and experiences of sixty three participants and two facilitators were thematically analysed. Findings are discussed under three broader themes emerged, namely; feeling the difference and fulfilling the felt need, voluntary participation and a relaxed and an enjoyable experience. According to the findings there was a felt need within participants for a new pedagogy such as LCT because going beyond feeling the difference between pedagogies and participating voluntarily, the participants highlight that they 'enjoyed the learning experience'.*

Keywords: Learner Centered Pedagogy; Active Learners; Feeling the Difference, Active Participation, Postgraduate Education

1. Introduction

Learning occurs even during the stage of the foetus of the human beings and ends at the graveyard. Learning is an active process, builds on prior knowledge, appears in a complex social environment, is situated in an authentic context, and requires learners' motivation and cognitive engagement³. Learning takes place in both formal and informal ways, but within education, the focus is on formal learning. Education happens at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels, while the latter consists of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Within education, different pedagogies such as 'teacher-centred' and 'learner-centred' facilitate learning in the teaching-learning process. Among the different approaches, the teacher-centred approach is considered the traditional and the most commonly used pedagogy at varying education levels^[26]. However, the common criticism levelled against the traditional teaching methods is not creating an environment in the classroom that enables developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills^[31]. In addressing these criticisms, another approach called 'student-centred' or 'Learner Centred Teaching' (LCT) has been introduced^{[20],[17]}.

People mean different things by 'student-centred'. Borrowing the words of STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), educator Robert Talbert states that goal of an LCT classroom is to change the mindset of the student from a 'renter' to an 'owner.' In a classroom of renters, fees are paid, and the management is expected to deliver. In contrast, a typical classroom of

owners forces the students to realise that it is their responsibility to engage, absorb, and retain. Developing such an environment is the instructors' job^[29].

Changing the learner's mindset from a passive student to an active learner is challenging^[30]. However, we, the researchers being the facilitators, planned to design a course on Management and Organisational Behaviour (OB) offered at the first semester of a postgraduate taught course (MBA in Management and Technology) to enable the student to become an active participant in class rather than to listen and take down notes passively. As course facilitators, researchers assumed that LCT is more relevant to postgraduate students because they are practitioners with industry experience and can relate theory to practice^[23]. This is because the content of the subject is heavily intertwined with the daily lives of organisations.

Within this backdrop, this study attempted to explore the extent to which learner-centred pedagogy can foster voluntary participation in a postgraduate taught course.

The paper is structured in the following manner. The paper begins with a brief discussion on the higher education system in Sri Lanka, followed by a review of relevant literature. The methodology adopted in conducting the study is discussed next. Then the data analysis is presented, and the final section consists of the study's conclusion and the study's contribution to the existing literature.

2. Higher Education in Sri Lanka

Establishing a significant milestone in higher education in Sri Lanka, which dates back to the ancient kingship period^[12], the University of Ceylon was established in 1942. This is the first autonomous university in Sri Lanka. The Ceylon University Ordinance No. 20 of 1942, passed on 1st July 1942, was the foundation for the University of Ceylon, initially located in Colombo. When establishing the University of Ceylon, the OXBRIDGE model was used as the blueprint^[33]. After six decades today, Sri Lanka has established seventeen state universities in different locations across the island^[34]. The free education system established in 1945 with the initiative taken by C. W. W. Kannangara^[32] is still in place, and the state authorities govern the public sector schools and the higher education institutions.

There are arguments about the issues prevailing in Sri Lankan state universities. Most of these issues are focusing on the areas such as orienting university courses to meet the contemporary demands of employers, improving IT and English language skills, and assessing the quality of human resources in academia^{[1],[33],[35]}.

In order to address the identified issues, at present, education system in Sri Lanka is undergoing rapid transformations aiming at creating a strong relationship among universities, industries and the wider society^[37]. However, especially the higher education sector is criticised for its quality and relevance in adhering to the increasing needs at local as well as global levels. Accordingly, a major concern under these criticisms was the absence of an academically stimulating environment and lectures degenerating into dictation^[16].

When specifically focusing on management education, there are criticisms as well. These are being highlighted because the participants of the study are from a postgraduate taught course in management. Accordingly, considering the outcomes of business management education, today's organisations seek individuals who can not only achieve goals and fulfil responsibilities but talented and ethical leaders who are prepared to face the challenges. Further, they have to ensure the business's success while making the organisation a positive global force in society^[27]. Thus, employers are in search of business graduates who are capable of analysing and solving organisational problems along with an awareness on the global challenges faced by organisations^[19].

Academic institutions can develop and maintain a positive change in the behaviours of individuals^[27]. However, in Sri Lanka, a criticism levelled against management education is that study programmes fail to prepare students adequately to cope with the managerial problems occurring in the world of work^[19]. One example is the common criticism on the traditional Master of Business Administration curriculum, which produces graduates who possess a poor ability to set goals, become leaders, communicate effectively, or think intuitively^[19]. This is because organisations' expectation of strengthening the knowledge and skills of employees through obtaining postgraduate qualifications has not been met. One of the approaches to address this issue is a change

in pedagogy, which has already been identified by several scholars^{[33],[16],[21],[15]}.

Further, it is highlighted that the system does not facilitate such a change^[33]. However, within this study, we attempted to explore the extent to which a new pedagogy can be practised and its effectiveness within the existing university system at a postgraduate level taught course in management. Accordingly, the study becomes timely and relevant as there is a concern regarding adopting new pedagogies to minimise the weaknesses in the current teaching-learning environment.

3. Literature Review

Educators who use an LCT believe that learning occurs within a social context, and it is a phenomenon that considers learning as multidimensional and nonlinear^[9]. A learner feels the difference between LCT and teacher centered pedagogies when learning becomes multidimensional and nonlinear.

Within an LCT setting, the teacher's position shifts from centre to periphery in the learning environment^{[20],[17]}. This is achieved by increasing students' opportunities to actively participate in the classroom, providing forums through which they can share learned information with peers and engage in self-directed learning outside the classroom^{[38],[30]}.

In order to enhance a wide range of student learner preferences, facilitators maintain supportive relationships for diffusing power differentials between students and facilitators^{[20],[17]}. Teachers diffuse power differentials intentionally by creating opportunities for students to become active in the learning process, treating students as partners in the learning process, and honouring and utilising student learners' individual experiences and perspectives^[11]. This in turn encourages students to voluntarily participate in the teaching and learning process.

In fostering self-directed learning in an LCT context, an educator prefers differentiated modalities to facilitate learning rather than relying on 'lecture' as the primary mean of teaching^[25]. Thus, an aspect used in facilitating the LCT classroom environment is incorporating flexible and varied teaching practices (e.g., multimedia, lecture, discussion, experiential activities) to satisfy a wider range of student learner preferences^{[7],[23]}. Instructors within LCT classroom room facilitate 'active learning' through activities such as problem-solving activities, open-ended assignments, cooperative learning, simulation, and critical-thinking exercises^{[22],[14]}.

Within an LCT environment, the use of multiple tools and maintaining low power difference result in a collaborative learning environment with voluntary participation. This is an important aspect of LCT because collaboration is a social process that helps participants challenge their beliefs through honouring many viewpoints of the peers in the classroom, develop problem-solving skills, and construct deeper personal understandings of course content^{[20],[7]}. Two LCT principles enable the instructors to nurture collaborative relationships as follows: Students should receive opportunities to teach each other what they have

learned, and students prefer to have a sense of ownership and control over their learning experiences^[36]. It is believed that learning is enhanced in safe and trusting environments, leading to learning with and from each other, where learners have supportive relationships, control over learning processes, and have a sense of ownership^[27].

At a time that seeks a change in pedagogy in the higher education sector in Sri Lanka, and with the theoretical underpinnings outlined above, this study aims at exploring the extent to which learner-centred pedagogy can foster voluntary participation in a postgraduate taught course.

The next section of the paper presents the methodology.

4. Methodology

The study attempts to share experiences of an LCT environment, and ontologically it takes the subjectivists stance. Thus, we, as researchers, decided to adopt qualitative methods to this research study because qualitative methods are intended to uncover the complexities of situations^[18] and enable the researcher to produce authoritative and valid knowledge about participants' experiences in their natural setting^{[28],[10]}. Further, qualitative methods offer a voice to participants because the data consists mainly of their own perceptions of their experiences in their own words^[4].

The data collection method is written feedback given by 63 participants at the end of the semester, even after submitting their continuous assessments.

Online feedback was obtained from the participants, which was not a mandatory requirement. The feedback consisted of open-ended questions covering the following areas:

- a) Students' expectations from the course,
- b) Experiences and reflections of the students regarding teaching, learning, and assessments,
- c) Degree of achievement of objectives, and
- d) Students' viewpoints on the learner-centred teaching-learning process.

The access is problematic in most qualitative studies^[8], but facilitators enjoyed a very high level of feedback from the participants^[13]. Thus, 63 (100%) participants returned the feedback forms. Without responding to questions with 'yes or no' answers, the participants willingly discussed their experiences within the lecture series. Such thoughtful and more profound insights of participants enabled us to obtain valuable themes that emerged from data.

Following the receipt of the feedback forms of the participants, the facilitators included their reflections and fieldwork notes as the second data source.

These data were analysed using two levels of coding followed by the thematic analysis^{[5],[6]}. The research process was reflexive, and as researchers in behavioural sciences, we adhered to ethical considerations to the best of our ability within this research to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of the institution and the participants.

To develop an LCT environment, the course, which consists of 15 sessions of 3-hour duration, was designed in the following manner. The first session began with an introduction to the course and the LCT approach, followed by an ice-breaking session because it was the first day of their MBA programme. Each session was facilitated by both lecturers playing their roles as appropriate. This enabled to minimise the power difference between the facilitators and students. This was strengthened with the encouragement for students to participate and become interactive in the learning process.

To ensure engagement and attention, in time-to-time, videos, songs, simple games, and group activities were incorporated into the teaching-learning process^[22]. Further, use of multi modalities facilitated to break the monotony. The subject being a highly theoretically driven one, it was a challenge for the facilitators to teach the theories in an LCT context. Thus, it was decided to use tools that are aesthetic in nature and related to the country's socio-cultural context. These being familiar examples to Sri Lankans, the use of such audios and videos facilitated the learners to understand the heavy theoretical underpinnings of the subject without much difficulty. Further, aligning with the LCT requirements, assessments were also designed to improve the learners' ability to relate theory to practice and present their own criticisms on the issues in the wider socio-economic, political, and cultural spheres.

Student feedback was thematically analysed. Initially, we obtained 46 codes, and in the second level, after grouping them into meaningful categories, we ended up with 15 codes, out of which three broader themes emerged, i.e., feeling the difference and fulfilling the felt need, voluntary participation and enjoying the felt difference. These themes are presented below with supporting evidence under the broader topic 'a journey through an LCT process'.

5. Findings

This section comprises of the findings of the analysis and are presented under the three broader themes emerged, namely; feeling the difference and fulfilling a felt need, voluntary participation, and a relaxed and an enjoyable experience.

Feeling the Difference and Fulfilling a Felt Need

While participating in the teaching and learning process voluntarily, the participants have felt the differences between teacher-centered and learner-centered pedagogies. Major pedagogy in Sri Lanka is teacher-centered even at the postgraduate level. Thus, the participants have compared and contrasted the two pedagogies. In their feedback, the felt need for a new pedagogy and differences felt within the lecture have been highlighted in varied perspectives such as study setting, role of facilitators and role of students in the learning process. Some of the evidences are given below.

I was surprised. This is a type of lecture I had in my dreams. Lecturers pleasantly transferred the lecture, and everyone pays their attention to the lecture (14 /JJ).

After being in teacher-centered lectures all the time, learner-centered approach became a very new concept and an experience to me. This approach was very successful to learn the theories of OB and management because most of the time group discussions, sharing different experiences inside the classroom, playing simple games etc. became helpful to understand the theories with the help of practical scenarios (17/U).

Relating the theory to practice was done through the means of theater, role plays and other creative mediums (06/D).

Recalling theories and understanding them by observing an organization is a learner centered approach where students are asked to apply the theories to their practical experiences (06/X).

Going beyond the study setting, the students have recognized how assessments are also becoming learner-centered.

According to my personal view, I think not only teaching but even assessments were directly reflecting the learner centered teaching / learning approach (06/J).

While recognizing the differences in the study setting, the students have identified the specific role played by the facilitators in attempting to implement a learner-centered pedagogy.

The lectures were very exciting and totally different from a traditional lecture (06/D).

Lecturers were very friendly and encouraging student ideas (14/D).

Both lecturers kept the vibe alive from the start to the end. Practical sessions carried out were a good way to keep us focused on. Really enjoyed the session (03/I).

Difference between the learner-centered lecture and normal lecture where only explanations of power point slides has been identified (06 / R).

Lectures progressed as discussions with the participation of all of us, hence, the difficulty in understanding and memorizing the theories reduced (9/A).

I have never experienced such attractive lecture sessions during my university life. Most interesting lecture sessions (03/T).

The students have gone to the extent to which they have recognised a behavioural change within themselves as learners in the teaching-learning process.

Even though I do not usually actively participate in lectures, since day one, I was excited and participating (03/D).

Although it is the last lecture of the day and conducted from 4.00pm – 7.00pm on Saturdays, the energy during that session was good enough to stay fresh throughout the whole lecture (14/X).

Within this new method of teaching, I never slept in this lecture and never felt boring (14/JJ).

Since in the undergraduate studies we didn't feel it that much, but here the lecture structure and the system was totally learner centered that allowed us to develop discussions on the subject matter and to present our thoughts and experiences (18/K).

Yes. I was experiencing the 'learner-centered' teaching because the lecturer was not merely going through theories, but having group work. We shared the experience of our team and we learnt others' experiences and we got a chance to understand how these theories appear in real world environment (18 / DD).

While the participants were feeling the difference of the new pedagogy and fulfilling the felt need, we, as facilitators also identified some behavioural changes of the participants.

Voluntary participation is the most notable behavioural change of the participants and they have gone through the learning process while acknowledging the difference between teacher-centered learning and LCT. Not limiting to the feeling the differences and fulfilling the felt need, the participants had enjoyed the new experiences within an LCT environment.

Voluntary Participation

Although the participants were experiencing a new pedagogy, which is a major change in teaching and learning, they have participated willingly and voluntarily. This experience is a contrast, when compared to typical resistance to change. Understanding the participants as postgraduate students who are holding managerial/executive positions in the private and public sector originations, the facilitators encouraged them to share their views in relation to the theoretical points that are being discussed in class. With this initiative, we, as facilitators, felt that the voluntary participation was a result of treating (recognizing) the participants as adults with life/work experience and exposure. Further, voluntary participation was strengthened by creating an environment to express their views and to interact with other participants. Some of the experiences of the participants, given in the feedback, are presented below:

We actively participated (16/GG).

In most of the classroom sessions, we discuss issues in groups which allowed us to interact with each other and put our perspective on specific issues (15/G).

I hated the new way of teaching at first but it gradually changed my perception and I participated into discussions willingly (07/CC).

Students engaged when practising learner centered approach. It motivated us to learn the subject very well (03/B).

Lecturers encouraged us to ask questions and requested for our suggestions. Group activities were well organized to learn subject matters on our own. These initiatives encouraged us to participate voluntarily (15/HH).

Within the group work, I worked together with the other group members in finding the answers (18/Y).

We voluntarily shared our own ideas with other students (18/B).

While actively participating in the learning process, they have recognised the fact that they are being treated by the facilitators as adults with experience and exposure;

The method adopted for is suitable for adults like us and it developed an interest towards the subject (7/F).

Discussions were not limited to the theory, but lecturers took experiences from students and shared those within the class (15/JJ).

I love the fact that students were encouraged to share their experiences and relate them to concepts learnt during the lecture (16/LL).

Everyone shared their experiences voluntarily and all of us are coming from different backgrounds. This enabled us to gain multiple perspectives on issues and it created a great value of learning (18/EE).

Going beyond the voluntary participation in the classroom, it is evident that the students have done the same in completing their assessments as well.

Yes, assignments reflected learner centered approach because we searched for more on our own to get them done (06/HH).

With the empirical evidence, it is clear that recognizing students as adults and maintaining a conducive learning environment within class, have encouraged the students to participate voluntarily not only in classroom activities, but also in assessments.

Enjoying the Need Fulfilment and Felt Difference

While going through a new pedagogy and willingly participating in the learning process, the participants had relaxed and enjoyed the learning experience. Following are the evidence;

Now I understood the unique difference and advantage to be a learner centered person. The happiness and the satisfaction that you get when you learn new things are amazing (07/CC).

They mainly focused in the learner-centered approach, and it was really interesting. We had some mind relax sessions as well (13/B).

Group and individual exercises broke the monotony of long hours of studying. (13/F).

It was very comfortable to stay in the class (13/D).

I did not feel how time passed within lectures (13/C).

Sessions were enjoyable and informative (3/G).

It gives a chance to understand and feel the natural and the exact real time scenarios. Also that gives a time to refresh the mind (07/BB).

Yes it was learner centered teaching and the lectures were very relaxing (13/F)

To be honest, I really enjoyed the sessions and I still remember those cutest moments (03/BB).

I realized that this lecture series really matches with my expectations (17/DD).

So, learner centered teaching is really good for me (17/B).

It was really nice experience (19/DD)

Simply Amazing... (19/GG)

It was surprisingly good (19/HH)

According to the findings presented above, the participants had felt the difference between the two pedagogies while fulfilling a long felt need. Their preference towards the new pedagogy and the need fulfilment resulted in the voluntary participation and ultimately enjoying the teaching learning experience.

6. Discussion

LCT approach, if decided and designed to meet the expectations of the participants, they identify the difference between the two approaches and ensure higher level of participation, and achieve higher level of learning outcomes while enjoying and being satisfied. Educators who use an LCT believe that learning occurs within a social context. Moreover, it is a phenomenon which considers learning as, multidimensional and nonlinear⁹.

Within this study, the participants actively engaged in the teaching learning process as a result of fulfilling a felt need and understanding the difference between teacher-centered pedagogy and LCT. The feelings students had regarding the new teaching-learning approach has encouraged them to get away from the traditional classroom and to voluntarily engage in learning. Apart from classroom engagement, the students have felt the difference in the given assessments. Accordingly, their feedback highlight how they recognised the assessments not as teacher-centered but as learner centered. Most significantly, the participants have felt a difference in the way the facilitators behaved within their attempt to implement LCT and to minimize the distance between the facilitator and the participant. Further, an aspect used in facilitating the LCT classroom environment is incorporating flexible and varied teaching practices (e.g., multimedia, lecture, discussion, experiential activities) to satisfy a wider range of student learner preferences^{7,23}. Thus, participants felt difference regarding the study setting and the behaviour of the participants indicate a culture change. That is a movement from teacher-centered classroom to a learner-centered classroom. This culture change is proven with the understanding of the participants regarding the behavioural change within themselves as learners in the teaching-learning process.

Findings further revealed that the students had a feeling of moving to an LCT environment. In such social setting, the teacher's position shifts from center to a periphery in the learning environment. This is achieved by increasing students' opportunities to actively participate in the classroom, providing forums through which they can share learned information with peers and engage in self-directed learning outside the classroom^[38]. Accordingly, there are ample evidence within the findings regarding the willingness of the participants to actively involve in the teaching-learning process. However, this is in contrast to a usual change situation where resistance is inevitable^[2].

With the empirical evidence, it is clear that recognizing students as adults and maintaining a conducive learning environment within class, have encouraged the students to

participate voluntarily not only in classroom activities, but also in completing assessments.

7. Conclusions

The study being an effort of the facilitators in introducing LCT pedagogy to a postgraduate taught course in Management and Technology, which consists of participants who have studied in teacher centered pedagogy within their educational life. With the introduction of the LCT pedagogy as totally a new teaching – learning approach one has to expect at least a certain amount of resistance from the students. In contrast, the participants have embraced the new pedagogy and expressed it as ‘feeling the difference’ between the two pedagogies. This finding leads to the conclusion that although the participants were into teacher-centered pedagogy, they had a felt need to be in LCT pedagogy and to actively engage in the teaching learning process. Thus, as soon as they got exposed to LCT they realized the opportunity they have to actively engage in the process and they ‘voluntarily participated’. Apart from the felt need, the participants being postgraduate students who are employed, they may have realized the new approach as an opportunity to relate the theory learnt in class to their day to day work experience. Further, it can be concluded that there was a felt need within participants for a new pedagogy such as LCT because going beyond feeling the difference between pedagogies and participating voluntarily the participants highlight that they ‘enjoyed the learning experience’. Thus, it can be concluded that the participants had a felt need for a new pedagogy which facilitates the active involvement in the teaching learning process. With the introduction of LCT, the felt need was fulfilled to a certain extent and the participants realizing the opportunity made use of it while enjoying the new experience.

8. Implications

In a country that has a very high respect to teachers even at postgraduate level, students do not question the teachers. However, making students feel that they are recognised as adults, and given the opportunity to interact and participate, students voluntarily engage in teaching learning process. Voluntary participation is an indication of a behavioural change of the participants as they move from the role of ‘passive recipient’ to an ‘active participant’.

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