

Teaching Context and Students' Learning: A Case Study of a Public Sector University

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Abstract

This is an exploratory research study that aimed at capturing students' learning experience in a public sector university campus in a remote region in Pakistan. The sample included students in the last semester of their two years Master's program in Education Data were generated through

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Adult learning, Higher education, Learning experiences, Managing learning, University Students

a questionnaire survey, in-depth interviews, and whole-class discussions with Master's students of Education. Findings showed that the students saw their learning embedded in-relation to the interaction with the faculty members, availability of resources, and interactive teaching approaches. It surfaced that remoteness of the context and unavailability of the Internet, lack of relative skills, and English language deficiencies, were key challenges.

Introduction

Learners are seen as key stakeholders in educational institutions (Biggs & Tang, 2011) and understanding of their experiences of learning is no doubt a *sine qua non* to ensure learning. The interest of researchers and educators in the area of capturing students' learning experience, at higher education level seems to gain a greater emphasis across the world. However, there has been a little or lesser emphasis on this very issue in Pakistan. Halai and Ali (2012) studied learning experiences of graduate students (MPhil & Ph.D.) in Department of Education of a public sector university and suggested to carry out further studies on students' learning experiences at the higher education level across the country.

The term higher education (HE), tertiary education, and post-secondary education are synonymous (Isani & Virk, 2003). Higher education institutions involve universities, colleges, and technical or professional institutions. Universities, as degree-awarding institutions, play a significant role in the context of higher education. Colleges and other technical institutions are generally affiliated with universities in Pakistan.

Understanding how the students construe their learning, what factors facilitate their learning, what the key challenges are, and how to overcome those challenges are vital if we really want to bring about changes in HE institutions. This study conducted in a public sector institution (Department of Educational development, University of Gilgit-Baltistan) located in a remote and mountainous region in the extreme North of Pakistan aiming to make sense of students' learning experiences supported by the objectives: understand how students (at HE level) construe learning; explore different factors that maximizes/facilitate students' learning at HE level; and survey/scrutinize certain hurdles for the students in their learning and conceptual understanding.

The Learning Context at Higher Education

Learning is rooted in our interaction with the environment, and what is learned and how it is learned is intertwined. Learning occurs due to individuals' interaction with the content, activities, and the context. According to Richardson (2010), students' approaches to studying in higher education are linked to their perceptions of the academic environment, conceptions of learning at

higher education and on how they see themselves as learners.

The work of Ramsden (1997) on the learning context in the academic departments, provide basic lenses to the study. His work sheds light on how the students' perceptions of teaching, learning, assessment, and structure of the academic department influence their learning and what the students construct out of this context. Likewise, Sadlo and Richardson (2003) found that students involved in problem-based learning were likely to develop an orientation to the meanings of their studies at higher education. In addition, besides the contextual learning environments, students' individual interests and background also influence their learning at higher education (Postareff, Lindblom-Ylanne & Parpala, 2014). Thus, the focus of this study is on how the students in a university department experience their learning in remote sub-campus of a university.

Prosser and Trigwell (1999) explain that students at the higher education level, approach their learning in two different ways; in the first approach, which they call a 'deeper approach', the students aim to understand ideas and seek meanings. The aforementioned plays an important role in the learning process. However, contemporary research on students' approaches to learning at higher education has not yet empirically proved whether students at higher education develop towards deeper approaches to learning (Asikainen & Gijbels, 2017). Nevertheless, studies have shown that students' positive and negative experiences are likely to result in deep and surface approaches to learning respectively (Parpala, 2010).

Unlike those in schools, learners at Higher Education level are adults. Methods, strategies, and principles used in adult education and learning are called andragogy. Knowles (1973) gives four key assumptions about andragogy. Those four assumptions include changes in self-concept, role of experience, readiness to learn and orientation to learning. Consequently, when people grow their self-concepts, they move from total dependency to self-directedness.

Since adults tend to be goal-directed learners; therefore, the importance of goals or purposes cannot be neglected. Goals may not be the only triggering factor for learning, but it becomes a primary factor to determine learners' interest, prior experience, and what learning is constructed as a result of the interaction (Knowles, 1973).

Parry, Thompson, and Blackie (2006) stated that all students in higher education never receive the same experience. In other words, individuals encounter different learning experiences. Therefore, teaching at higher education level should focus on such approaches which maximize students' learning experience through enhancing analytical and critical thinking skills based on their involvement in deep learning approaches. According to Biggs and Tang (2011) establishing a climate of conducive learning environment is vital to maximize students' learning at higher education. They further stated that learning experience in a higher education institution aims to help students become lifelong learners, as a result they are able to make sense of situations and respond accordingly.

In Pakistan, ensuring quality learning at higher education level has always been a concern. For instance, Isani and Virk (2003) highlight issues related to the higher education in Pakistan, which involves ineffectiveness and inefficient nature of design and delivery of educational services, low research productivity, poor induction mechanism, and limited offers of subject choices comprising generally Arts and Science groups.

Methodological Decisions

The study was conducted in the Department of Educational Development, University of Gilgit-Baltistan. At the time of the study, there were only four departments functioning on the campus including the Department of Educational Development. There was a small library, a small computer lab (having only 25 PCs), and no internet facility in the campus as the town where the campus was located, did not have the internet provision.

Out of 40, a total of 36 students responded to the questionnaires. Likewise, twelve students (Female: 8, Male: 4) voluntarily participated in the interviews. Likewise, the researchers conducted a whole class discussion (90 minutes duration) allowing the students to share their learning experiences at the university campus. Anonymity and confidentiality concerns were addressed through not asking the respondents to write names on the questionnaires. Furthermore, the study used pseudonyms to analyze the qualitative data.

Majority of the students come from lower-middle-class families. They spoke local languages. Urdu and English were second and third languages for them. The campus was the only university campus in the entire region having population of above 600,000. Modern facilities, including the internet and other technologies for everyday usages are rare in the region.

We employed a descriptive exploratory approach for data collection and analysis. The study aims to understand the nature of students' experience of their learning in a higher education institution in Pakistan. The sample included students in the last semester of their two years of Master's program in Education. It was an exploratory study (Bryman, 2004; Creswell, 2003), and data were collected through a variety of sources that include questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and whole-class discussions. Such approaches for data collection are generally used by qualitative researchers (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Merriam,

1998; Rossman & Rallis, 1998). The questionnaire contained statements related to facilitating aspects of learning, (such as faculty, resources, internet, and teaching approaches) which were rated by the respondent on a five-point Likert scale. Likewise, semi-structured interviews were used to generate qualitative data.

Data were analyzed through a rigorous process of employing descriptive approach for the analysis of data collected through the questionnaires. Similarly, the process of data analysis for qualitative data involved three consecutive stages of activities, which Miles and Huberman (1994) call data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. This stage-wise handling of the data helped us to prepare the data for the analysis through transcription of the interviews and developing computer files of all the data collected. As a result, we were able to go through the data several times looking for emerging themes and sub-themes.

Findings

Findings from the study have been presented under several themes emerging from the analysis.

Individuals Have the Onus of Their Own Learning

Findings showed that the students see the importance of their learning and think that they are the key players of their own learning. For example, one of the research participants said,

I think I have the responsibility for my own learning. If I am ready and willing then I don't care about any hurdles, challenges, and difficulties. As a student, I have to continue my struggle and look for various ways of learning. I have a clear purpose, that is, to enhance my knowledge and skills so as to compete in the market and live a respectable life.

It was found that as a result of the realization of the importance of their own learning, students look for various ways that become instrumental to their learning. A research participant said, "A man [person] is a teacher for himself/herself. He/she knows better about his/her priorities and ways to move forward. It is up to him/her how he/she can benefit out of the facilities at the university campus". It surfaced that being an adult at the HE level; students are in a position to take decisions and to set priorities for their own learning. For instance, they select courses of studies based on their own interest, needs, and background. One of the research participants mentioned,

I took my own decision during my admission and selected the Department of Education. I already have been working as a teacher; therefore, I needed to enhance my knowledge and skills as a teacher. I thought this program would help me to know how students learn and how to teach as a result, who is a good teacher, how to run a school etc. Doing Masters in Education was the right decision for me.

It was obvious that research participants' own interest and background played a pivotal role in their career decision making and thus for their motives for learning. They seem to come to the campus to achieve some goals and objectives. They also know that the more they put energy into their studies the better their learning be.

Social Interactions are Instrumental in Learning

All the research participants considered social interaction as an important source of their learning at the university level. They felt that a university is a place that provides a platform for interaction. This interaction is key to the learning of the students. Through quantitative survey data (N = 36) pertaining to the students' favorite teaching methods, it was found that the respondents preferred those methods which allow more faculty-students, and students-student interactions. For instance, lecture-cum-discussion methods (Mean score 4.36, SD 0.85), only lecture method (Mean Score 4.14, SD 0.84), only discussion method (Mean Score 3.41, SD 1.14) were the result of the survey. The subsequent qualitative interviews also reinforced the above-mentioned results. During the detailed qualitative interviews, one of the research participants said,

I mostly learn through discussion in the classrooms, through interactions with faculty and classmates. I prefer the discussion method in the classroom. I prefer lecture-cum-discussion method. Learning is not specific to the classrooms. I also interact with people outside and use the internet for contemporary information.

The above-mentioned extract from the interview shows that at the higher education level, students become the teachers of their own learning. They also seem to know how to enhance their learning. This element of learning seems to play a key role in learning and development at HE level. The importance of social interaction is also vivid in the above extract. It was found that students in a university platform have multiple choices for interaction. It also surfaced that interacting with the faculty members and peers as well as attending seminars, conferences, and symposia become instrumental to the students' learning on the campus. Questionnaire survey results showed that the respondents gave importance to faculty members (Mean Score 4.5, SD 0.66), peers (Mean Score 3.27, SD 1.20) and seminars and conferences (Mean Score 3.77, SD 1.11) for their learning as these were the sources for interactions. Data from the qualitative phase also showed the same notion. Extracts from the interviews of the research participants are given below.

Participant B: "I like lecture-cum-discussion method. Through this method, first we learn from faculty members and then we get opportunities to discuss, share ideas, and ask questions for clarifications".

Participant C: "I learn in different ways. The best ways of learning for me, are classroom discussions, open environment, interaction with teachers and students".

Data showed that generally, students interact with the faculty members in connection with feedback on various assignments, getting clarifications, and discussing career-related concerns. Some of the research participants also considered faculty members as mentors and coaches. A research participant said, "Faculty members are like senior colleagues, they are like mentors, who not only take care of our academic learning but also our overall personality development". Similarly, data showed that student-student interaction was mainly on academic matters such as assignments, project work, and also various informal discussions. It was also found that the students discuss career-related information among themselves too.

Most of the research participants mentioned that they liked to interact with their friend circles only. Their respective circles of friends seem to give them a comfort zone for interactions. For instance, a research participant explained,

I generally prefer to interact with the peers with whom I feel comfortable to interact with. Sometimes, I get an opportunity to interact with others too in connection with some group assignments. This is also good to learn from people with different backgrounds.

The data analysis presented in the above lines showcased that the research participants prefer interactions for their learning. They mentioned that interactive classrooms such as the interaction among students as well as with faculty members give them more learning opportunities.

Faculty as Triggers and Facilitators of Learning

As mentioned in the earlier section that respondents from the quantitative survey considered faculty members (Mean Score 4.5, SD 0.66) as big sources of learning. In a newly established campus with a limited number of books and computers in the library and laboratory respectively, faculty members are the key sources of learning for the students. The role of faculty members emerged as a facilitator and motivator for learning. Research participant in the whole class discussion said:

Participant B: I look at my faculty. They are a model for me. I observe them how they manage their time, what they study, how they interact, how they communicate, and above all, how they teach.

It was found that all the research participants considered the faculty members as facilitators of learning rather than imposers of ideas and concepts. As mentioned in an earlier section that the research participants took the onus of their own learning. They considered themselves as the key players in the learning process, hence seeing the faculty members as facilitators. This means that the role of the faculty is wider in the sense as a guide, encourager, information and knowledge provider, coach, critical friend, and an evaluator. Most of the research participants also saw the role of the faculty members from a moral and religious perspective. They considered faculty members as the models of the moral values and considered faculty members as well-wishers. Thus the analysis of the interview data shows that students at a higher education institution, consider faculty members as facilitators of their learning and role models for their career. Their perceptions about teachers seem to be nested in the cultural and religious values in society.

Deficiency in the English Language is a Barrier for Learning

English is the medium of instruction on the campus. Most of the students come from the Urdu medium background. Therefore, coping with the language becomes a real challenge for them. Some extracts from the interview data are given below.

Participant A: For me, the English language is a barrier. I come from Urdu medium. As you know, here, the language is English. I generally face difficulties to understand concepts.

Participant B: As I told you that I like field-based assignments. But, when it comes to writing the assignments, I feel difficulties. It is always difficult. The grammar, you know!

For most of the students, English is their third language. In school, they are generally taught in Urdu, which is the national language. In schools and colleges, English is being taught as a subject only. The medium of instruction in universities is generally English, which creates a hurdle for the students in their learning and conceptual understanding.

Resources are Important but they are Rare

It is a fact that resources can play a pivotal role in learning of students in educational institutions. In the survey, the respondents gave importance to resources on a five-point scale with a Mean score = 4.66 (SD 0.66). In addition,

the Mean Score for the importance of the library in the learning of the students remained 4.05 (SD 0.95). It was found that all the research participants talked about the importance of resources in their learning. The following are some extracts from the interviews pertaining to the importance of resources in their learning.

Participant A: The Internet provides us with relevant information pertaining to our study. I also learn through the TV, and even through the cell phone.

Participant B: I also spare enough time to study various books in the library and at home. Our library has a small number of books, therefore, I also go to the Municipal library in the town.

Besides realizing the importance of resources in their learning, the research participants mentioned that there were very limited resources on the campus. They mentioned the challenges they face due to limited resources. They felt that modern technology has created uneven opportunities for learning in remote areas where internet is not available to all.

Analysis of data revealed that modern technology has made access to information easier, yet it has created challenges too. Firstly, a smaller number of learners have access to it. Majority in the remote areas do not have even access to a newspaper. This has created challenges. Secondly, there is a huge flow of information due to IT. It is difficult to scrutinize what is suitable and relevant. In addition, it surfaced that certain skills are needed to browse through the internet. Students need to develop certain skills to benefit from the internet.

Discussion of the Findings

Findings highlighted in the previous section have showcased that students at higher education level see their learning in relation to their own interest and the academic context (interaction with the faculty members, available resources, facilities, and language capabilities). Their approaches to learning seem to be contextually driven (Richardson, 2010). In a small sub-campus of a university in a remote region, it surfaced that students take responsibility for their own learning. They seem to know their individual purposes to come to the university and realize that their hard work would bear fruit once they graduate from the university. As adults, their individual purposes provoke their learning in the university (Knowles, 1973). Similarly, the research participants also referred to the faculty members, peers, and resources such as library, computer lab, and the internet as significant sources of learning. These findings reinforce what Halai and Ali (2012) found, for instance, they also found that graduate students in universities in Pakistan consider faculty as facilitators and guide and they considered themselves as responsible to their own learning and appreciated resources available for them in the university. However, participants in this particular study showed their concerns related to limited resources such as a library, computer lab, and the internet on the campus. Being a newly established sub-campus, resources such as library books, computers in lab and the internet facility. These resources have huge implications for a higher education institution with respect to ensuring quality (Ghaffar, 2007; UNESCO-IIEP, 2011) and standards (Liston, 1999). It means that the higher education institutions need to equip themselves with relevant resources so as to provide quality learning experience (Biggs & Tang, 2011) to the students.

The region is located in the remote and rural content, away from the mainstream cities in the country, did not have easy access to the internet. Therefore, the students found Information Technology creating uneven learning opportunities for them. For instance, most of the students could not afford to have internet access in their homes. In addition, majority of the students were female and due to cultural restriction in the region, Female students were reluctant to go to the internet café to avail the internet facility. It also surfaced that students needed IT related skills to benefit out of the resources on the Internet. Students' preferences to more inquiry-based and exploratory approaches to learning have also implications for the instructional approaches in higher education institutions.

English language, which is the medium of instruction, surfaced as a barrier for the learning of the students. The English language became an obstacle for the students as it was the third language for them. The education system in the country has always lacked appropriate mechanism of English language acquisition and teaching in the school. English is just being taught as a subject in mainstream schools. According to Khan and Butt (2018) there is a need to strengthen teaching and learning of languages; particularly English language in the schools through the provision of language teacher education in the country. Hawkins (2013) rightly mentions that language and literacy play a central role in many disciplines, discourses, as well as in educational initiatives on learning in homes, schools, and communities. Due to the lack of fluency in English language the students at higher education institutions face difficulties in their learning.

Recommendations

This research study aimed at exploring students' learning experience at higher education level in a public sector university campus in Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan. Findings of the study surfaced the findings of the study.

1. Academic administrations may make sure that students have access to libraries and laboratories so that they are able to engage in the learning experience. In addition, an arrangement of seminars, conferences, and symposia will also give opportunities to students to widen their learning experience and to benefit from the contemporary developments in education.
2. Opportunities for social interactions within and outside the classrooms may be provided to the students through curricular activities.
3. The English Language becomes a barrier in learning for the students. Universities may work closely with schools and colleges to enhance the language proficiency of the students. Once, these students are in the universities, they will not see language as a barrier.

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