

EFFECTIVENESS OF THE FORUM METHOD FOR THE SELF DEVELOPMENT COURSE IN UKM AND ITS LINK WITH STUDENT INTEREST

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ABSTRACT

Student inability to explain concepts learnt in lessons using their own words academically and intellectually and their lack of interest in learning the subject are a cause of their incompetence in the development of their personality. This presents a challenge to lecturers that they should not rely entirely on conventional lectures and tutorials. Instead, there is a need to employ a variety of teaching methods to stimulate student minds and encourage them to pursue knowledge.

As an effort to diversify learning and teaching methods, a study was conducted to improve weaknesses of teaching and learning methods by organizing to motivate students. This was done to help students realize that concepts learnt in the course are relevant to their daily life and to encourage them to seek knowledge of self development which can be applied outside the class. The fora were followed with an action research. This action research was aimed at analyzing the effectiveness of the forum as an alternative method of teaching and learning of the Self Development Course.

A sample of 73 students of various academic faculties 2012/2013 were involved in the forum competition. The sample was divided into two groups: panelists group and audience group. Panelists wrote two reports on their experience from the beginning stage of preparing forum materials until the final stage of conducting the forum itself. Listeners

groups were assessed as to their interest and observation to the forum content and its discussion while it was being conducted. The effectiveness of this strategy is based on analysis of student reports on the conducted forum and debates in it. Results show that forum received a positive response among the students.

The forum approach increased student skills to relate to current issues in explaining facts they have learnt, encouraged cooperation among them to solve problems and increased interaction skill as well as built self-confidence. Therefore they could sharpen their soft skills and were able to solve problems and human-related issues.

Keywords: Effectiveness, forum, self development, UKM, interest.

INTRODUCTION

A lecturer's teaching is said to be effective when students under his or her guidance show an interest in and have learnt something from what has been presented by the lecturer. Learning, meanwhile, is said to occur when there is a change in the learner's attitude or behavior after going through the lessons.

With regards to the ZT1062 Self Development Course (SDC) offered to students of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) or The National University of Malaysia. The objective of the course is said to be achieved when the student is able to not only remember the contents of the subject delivered but also academically and intellectually explain concepts which have been learnt using their own words. With this they can polish their soft skills and be capable of resolving human-related issues and problems.

Moreover, this course trains students to apply four soft skills namely:

- effective communication in various situations,
- critical thinking, problem solving and scientific approach,
- leadership and teamwork, and
- information management skill and lifelong learning.

Application of the four skills can be implemented using the method of forum which is conducted in groups. Students are required to practically apply the four soft skills to strengthen and fortify soft skill elements within themselves. The practical aspect of this is necessary to produce holistic students who can contribute to the society and organizations (Center of General Studies, 2011).

Nevertheless, lecturer's effort in nurturing student's enthusiasm towards learning of the Self Development Course (SDC) occasionally meets an ending road because of student's misconception of the subject. This is due to the fact that it is an elective course of the faculty and requires a high level of soft skill to apply in the real world. This sometimes can lower students' interest in the course which has yet to reach a level desired by the university.

This issue may be closely related to the teaching delivery method used. This presents to lecturers a challenge of not delivering teaching materials through the conventional use of lectures and discussions during tutorials only without active participation of the students. A question therefore arises whether or not the method of forum increases student interest in learning SDC. Does it help the students in learning the course?

When it comes to learning situation, Azizeh et al. (2010) suggests that teachers, the curriculum, the syllabus, textbooks and school activities must continuously be improved so that students can maintain a positive attitude and the process of teaching and learning remain effective. In the context of Malaysia, many researches have been done related to the improvement of students teaching and learning including the implementation of

forum method and the incorporation of learning styles in educational technology (Pai, 2012; Cooper, 1982; Mohd Nawi et al., 2013; Mohd Nawi et al., 2012). This is in addition to the improvements in learning conditions and facilities such as the aids from the government to Islamic religious schools, whose students are also encouraged to have those methods in their learning activity (Umar et al., 2012a; Umar et al., 2012b; Umar et al., 2012c; Umar et al., 2012d).

As an intervention to this problem, this research proposes a student-centered teaching approach which is necessary to encourage student participation. This approach can motivate students to be keen to learn, encourage them to pursue knowledge and challenge them to keep developing their skills. A teaching method introduced by the lecturer was the method of forum. Through this approach, it is hoped that students realize that SDC is not only about understanding the theories or memorizing the concepts but they must relate what has been learnt with its application in their life so that the learning of SDC is realistic and appealing to them.

In light of those, this action research was carried out to evaluate the effectiveness of the forum method in the learning of the Self Development Course among students and its link with their interest. This action research was also aimed at pioneering a more suitable alternative to nurture keenness towards SDC among UKM students and at rectifying their misconception towards the subject.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To gauge students' response to the use of forum in teaching and learning.
- To identify strengths and weaknesses of the use of forum in the learning of Self Development Course among students.
- To pioneer a new approach in the teaching and learning of the Self Development Course.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study gives emphasis on the effectiveness of a student-centered learning strategy namely a forum. Forum is a suitable verbal activity whereby students share their knowledge and experience directly to deliver ideas and thoughts in a clear, creative, objective and rational manner. In order to successfully conduct this activity, the chosen title of the forum ought to be simple, interesting and yet challenging to match the skills, achievements and age level of the students. Careful preparations must also be made before, during and after the activity. Forum is a session of discussion in which panelists exchange ideas and opinions to conceive some thoughts on a topic being discussed and it is usually conducted formally.

The sample of this survey involved a group of 73 students divided into three classes. The sample was also divided into two main groups which were the group of forum panelists and the group of audience. The panelist groups would write reports on their experience at two stages from the stage of preparing materials for the forum until the stage of their very involvement in conducting the forum. The audience group would be evaluated as to their interest and their attention to the forum while it was being conducted. The effectiveness of this strategy was known based on an analysis of student reports on the forum activity. The students were asked to fill a questionnaire form given as soon as the activity ended. The questionnaire form consisted of three parts:

- Part A: This part contained information about personal background of the respondent, i.e. gender, race, age and the faculty of study.
- Part B: This part contained 26 questions or statements regarding the audience response to the forum. Students were required to answer the

questions in the form of reports and their views on the forum method and its link to their interest.

- **Part C:** This part contained only 6 questions to obtain student response and recommendations.

Obtained data were analyzed and coded qualitatively using a technique of textual content analysis of the reports submitted by the students. This enabled the researcher to understand further the issue at hand. This involved four stages:

- **Stage 1:** Determining analysis units using specific word/sentence/paragraph which was ascertained based on the problem statement of this study.
- **Stage 2:** Dividing transcripts into analysis units.
- **Stage 3:** Constructing categories.
- **Stage 4:** Codifying analysis units into categories whereby each unit of information was classified according to their category which cannot be overlapping with any other category.

Grounded theory analysis was done to determine a hypothesis from the accumulated data. Also done were discourse analysis of texts, semiotic analysis and understanding of interpretative phenomenological experience of the student.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The Self Development Course (SDC) is a general subject offered to UKM students. There is a need to shift the focus of teaching to student-centered teaching from conventional lectures which is lecturer-centered. The reason for this is that, the large number of students spanning over faculties, programs and departments and the large number of groups can occasionally impede effective teaching and learning process (Muhammad, 2007).

According to previous observations, a problem regularly faced was that some students were weak in their basic skills in discussing issues of the forum. They were less skillful in using their own words in developing or discussing ideas and thoughts. There was a tendency of students to pick the subject of SDC depending on certain topics within the subjects only. There was also a lack of motivation from the lecturers to take SDC. Moreover, another factor contributing to the lack of interest in SDC was unsuitable timing of the classes. In addition to the large size of the class, teaching method using lectures alone appeared less appealing to the students, apart from the lack of in-class student involvement and interaction.

Nevertheless, student-centered teaching and learning may face difficulties especially for classes with a large number of students, requiring an additional approach. This study therefore was to find out if the method of forum can help raise student interest in learning the ZT1062 Self Development Course. The method of forum was introduced so that students were exposed to and given opportunity of expressing their thoughts and linking the theories of self development with current issues in life. It was hoped that this approach can instil a healthy rivalry among students to seek knowledge and spur their curiosity to know more about what matters in their life.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ragbir Kaur (2006) defined teaching as a process in which activities are arranged so as to bring about change in behavior and attitude in the student. It also brings to the fore ways how teachers/lecturers should handle any learning activity systematically and not by trial and error (Kaur, 2006). This is because teaching is an action undertaken by the

teacher/lecturer to assist students in gaining skills and knowledge or changing their attitude, level of appreciation or perception (Kaur, 2006).

Teacher/Lecturer-centered strategy is a teaching and learning strategy long practiced in classrooms/lectures. In this strategy, teacher/lecturer dominates and controls all learning activities. This method only focuses on facts delivery because student learning are mainly in the form of remembering and memorizing.

Students therefore lack capability of making interpretations. Consequently, students became less creative lacking initiatives (Kaur, 2006). Hence, lecturer teaching must have creative, innovative and pro-active characteristics so that teaching and learning process which takes place can attract student interest making them more effective and efficient.

Among the strategies which should be highlighted is forum. This strategy is based on centering on student and activity as student is encouraged to get involved in teaching and learning activities planned by the lecturer/teacher. If the assignment planned and given by the teacher/lecturer is interesting, it will be able to entice student interest and increase student involvement in the process of teaching and learning (Curriculum Development Center, 1997).

The technique of forum is one of the verbal activities considered effective. This is due to the fact that it involves student sharing knowledge and experience and polishing skills of delivering ideas in a clear, creative and rational manner. This approach is also capable of strengthening student understanding and exploring of knowledge in addition to grooming their talent and exhibiting their oratory skill (Jonassen, 1996).

Discussion on an issue gives opportunity to the students to interact with each other and exchange information on the topic or issue of self development and personality, all in the name of reaching a solution to the issue or problem. However, forum only involves a number of students, causing the rest to only listen and watch as observers as they are not actively involved in the activity (Jamil et al., 2004).

This method of forum can encourage situations for cooperative learning. This is because, according to Slavin (1991), cooperative learning is a method which needs student cooperation to learn and be responsible for team members' learning on top of their own learning. Students need to get actively involved in discussion session to make the forum activity a success. In addition, they are trained with self accountability and being responsible for each other in the team as well as nurturing skills and social interaction (Kaur, 2006).

METHODOLOGY

This study was limited to the target group of 73 UKM students who took the course ZZT1062 Self Development II during Semester 2 of the 2012/2013 academic year session. Obtained data were based on replies from respondents in the questionnaire which was the textual material of the survey.

Respondents consisted of 34 male students and 39 female students. Almost all were of the Malay race except for a single respondent who was an Indonesian. By faculty, respondents were made up of this: 63 or 86.3% of total respondents were from the Faculty of Islamic Studies, 7 (4.12) were from the Faculty of Economy and Business and the remainder 3 students (9.58%) were from the Faculty of Science and Technology.

Of the 73 respondents, a majority of 40 students or 54.8% had never been involved in any forum activity prior to enrolling into the university. Only 25 respondents (34.25%) had experience getting involved in a forum while the rest (8 students or 10.95%) answered they were unsure whether or not they had been involved in forum activity.

Results of the survey found that the majority of respondents (49 students or 67.12%) agreed that forum is suitable for implementation in teaching and learning. This is because, according to them, the same method of teaching through lectures and PowerPoint© presentation only can cause the students to become bored and wearied. Therefore, a diversified approach to teaching, such as video presentation, pictures, jokes, stories etc., is less boring, able to make the conditions for teaching and learning more attractive and can nurture interests in the students.

Since the time of lectures for SDC was in the afternoon, it was only appropriate for the lecturers to use a variety of teaching method to expose the students to the challenges of activities in which students can take part. However, a few respondents (7 or 9.6%) said that forum was not suitable for teaching and learning while 17 respondents (23.38%) were not sure of the method being suitable or not. This was probably because some students preferred a teaching method of lecture as it is more easily understood compared to the method of forum conducted by the students themselves which can cause confusion with regards to the topics discussed in the forum.

Nevertheless, the majority of students responded positively to the statement that SDC helped them much in conducting the forum which was organized. A total of 56 respondents (76.72%) agreed to the statement while a meagre 6 students (8.2%) did not agree. There were 11 students (15.08%) who were not sure of their answer.

Interestingly, majority of students (56 of them or 76.7% of total respondents) displayed a high level of seriousness and skills even before they conducted the forum in class. These students confirmed that they were able to arrange a strategy to extract data and information to be presented in the forum. A sum of 10 respondents (13.7%) answered they were unsure they were able to do so while only 7 students (9.6%) answered negatively. This gave a view that students were well-prepared prior to their involvement in the forum activity. In fact, a majority of 50 respondents (68.5%) did not agree that forum was not practicable to new students. Only 3 students (4.1%) said forum was not practicable while some 20 students (27.4%) were uncertain.

This survey also found that forum can develop a high cognitive domain among students and increase student problem solving ability. Majority of respondents (63 students or 86.3%) agreed to the statement that forum can increase student problem solving ability. Only 2 respondents (2.73%) did not agree while the rest (8 students or 10.97%) were not sure about the statement. The following table gives a better picture of their answers:

Table: 1
Forum Increases the Ability of Problem Solving

No.	Answer	Total	Percentage (%)
1	Agree	63	86.30
2	Not Sure	8	10.97
3	Do not agree	2	2.73
Total		73	100

A majority of 53 students or 72.6% of respondents had the opinion that debates in the forum were neither boring nor a waste of time. To them, forum can develop further student creativity, increase their problem-solving skill and enhance ability to deal with current issues effectively. However, 5 respondents (6.84%) saw forum as a cause for their feeling bored and a waste of time. The remaining 15 respondents (20.56%) were unsure of their opinion on the statement.

Apart from that, suitability of topics chosen by each group and discussed in the forum was also able to encourage deep SD learning. Based on analysis, as many as 57 students

(78.08%) said that topics chosen by them are able to develop their soft skills and deeper learning of SD. This occurred as topics debated in the forum matched with topics in the course. Only 7 respondents (9.58%) disagreed with the statement because to them the topics were probably unsuitable with what were discussed in the SD course. Meanwhile 9 students (12.34%) were unsure about the statement.

Besides developing soft skill and enhancing deeper learning of SD, forum can enhance communication skills among students. This was clearly agreed by almost all of the 72 respondents (98%).

Most of them who took part in the forum and its debate activity were prepared materially and mentally. Forum also became a field for them to display non-verbal communication skill. A total of 48 respondents (65.75%) agreed to that statement.

However, 11 students (15.06%) made a stand that forum was less helpful in showing their ability in non-verbal communication. Also, 14 respondents (19.19%) were not sure. To get a clearer picture, see Table: 2 below:

Table: 2
Forum Exhibits Non-verbal Communication

No.	Answer	Total	Percentage (%)
1	Agree	48	65.75
2	Disagree	11	15.06
3	Not sure	14	19.19
Total		73	100

Interestingly, many among the respondents showed a positive attitude toward forum method and its effectiveness compared to the teaching method of lecturing. Result of this opinion poll found that 40 students (54.79%) affirmed that the method of teaching using the technique of forum participated by students is more effective than lectures delivered by lecturers. They probably perceived that teaching and learning by lectures only involve one-way communication and that lectures were less appealing causing students to lose their attention and to fall asleep. To them, forum allowed students to understand the topic more clearly because of its two-way communication in addition to it causing them to help each other. Besides, this approach also gives students chance of interaction among panelists and the audience.

25 respondents (34.25%) meanwhile were unsure about this. It is probable that to them the ideas and information uttered in the forum did not fully give a holistic view of the topic and this should be given due elaboration by the lecturer as it might not be suitable with the level of knowledge students had.

The rest of respondents (8 students or 10.96%) thought that lectures delivered by the lecturer were more attractive than forum technique. Among the reasons why they thought so was that explanation by the lecturer was more profound in elaborating the issue being raised. Choice of words and delivery by the lecturer were more orderly and easier to understand as each substance was explained and elaborated together with examples based on the wider and deeper knowledge the lecturer had on each topic being discussed. Moreover, fora conducted by students gave less understanding to the students due to the way they conducted the forum which was less effective to the audience. Response to the statement can be seen in Table 3 below.

Table: 3
Forum Method is Less Attractive than Lecturer Presentation

No.	Answer	Total	Percentage (%)
1	Agree	8	10.96
2	Disagree	40	54.79
3	Not sure	25	34.25
Total		73	100

Apart from giving a picture of teaching method effectiveness, this study also identified its link with student interest. Findings of this survey showed that majority of respondents, 49 of them or 67.12%, agreed that forum can give rise to interest in learning SD course among students. To them, learning the SD course is not limited to understanding of theories or memorizing of concepts. They must be put into practice in life.

Only a diminutive amount of 3 students (4.12%) said that forum did not stimulate interest in learning the course. Among their reasons was that, to organize forum activity, certain format of the forum was necessary which was unknown to some of them rendering them clueless in handling the forum activity.

A sum of 21 students (28.76%) answered they were not sure of the statement. To them, interest in the subject is based on the presentation by the panelists. If panelists did not show a good presentation, it would cause a less interesting forum activity. The findings are summarized as in Table: 4 below.

Table: 4
Forum Can Induce Student Interest

No.	Answer	Total	Percentage (%)
1	Agree	49	67.12
2	Disagree	3	4.12
3	Not sure	21	28.76
Total		73	100

This study found that majority of students (62 respondents or 84.94%) agreed to the statement that forum can develop high skills in information management and lifelong learning. This is because forum is not only able to build confidence within them but also train them to be resourceful in getting and analyzing information more effectively. Meanwhile, only a small number of 4 people or 5.5% of respondents said that they did not agree to the statement. They reasoned that the techniques of forum and debate are less helpful in showcasing their ability and enhancing their skills in the two areas. They also argued that some students were less prepared for the forum causing the forum a mess with some panelists concentrating on the prepared text. In addition to this, a number of panelists were less skillful in discussing the issue causing the students to get bored and sleepy. The remainder 7 respondents (9.56%) stated they were unsure of the above statement. This finding can be seen in a summary in Table 5 below:

Table: 5:
Forum Method Can Enhance Skills in Information Management and Lifelong Learning

No.	Answer	Total	Percentage (%)
1	Agree	62	84.94
2	Disagree	4	5.50
3	Not sure	7	9.56
Total		73	100

Not only is forum capable of developing skills in information management and lifelong learning, but it also encourages students to think critically and be able to identify issues and synthesize solution in detail. This is evident in answers given by respondents who in majority (59 of them or 80.82%) agreed that forum in teaching and learning can encourage critical thinking in students and their ability to identify and discuss an issue in detail. Only 4 respondents or 5.47% stated their disagreement with the above statement while 10 students or 13.71% answered they were not sure.

Based on the analysis, forum gives opportunity to student to build leadership qualities within themselves and forge close relation among them through teamwork. This is because 83.56% of respondents agreed that forum discussion gives opportunity for them to build leadership qualities. Only 4.1% of respondents disagreed with the statement. The remaining 12.34% of respondents were not sure about the statement. Meanwhile, almost all respondents, or 94.52% agreed that forum can forge close ties by working in a team. Only 5.48% of respondents did not agree to the statement.

SUMMARY

The teaching mode of delivery using forum has many positive impacts to students and can interest them to learn as well as give a deep grounding of the subject. It can also increase student's ability to solve problems and encourage constructive communication among students. However, weaknesses on the side of the students in terms of their skills, experience and knowledge when conducting the forum caused the audience's interest to decrease as compared to the one conducted by the lecturer.

Lecturers must take initiatives in teaching and learning method so that students feel less bored and get more interested in self development course. The forum technique should not be restricted to times of lectures only. It can be briefly conducted at other times. This helps students to increase their skills in communication, critical thinking, problem solving, leadership, teamwork, information management and lifelong learning.

Students are likely to view forum as a fun method of discussion and exchanging ideas under lecturer's guidance. In fact, forum can also be conducted using information technology such as using the application i-FOLIO and the likes This approach can nurture individuals of high caliber and excellent career success.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the findings in the survey analysis, several recommendations have been proposed to improve the weaknesses in the teaching and learning process of the ZZT1062 Self Development Course in UKM so that the forum and debate method can attract the interest of the students. The recommendations are as follows:

1. **Sufficient Student Preparation.**
One of the reasons why students consider forum ineffective and unappealing was that students were less prepared for an interesting and convincing conduct of the forum. Lecturers therefore need to, earlier on in the tutorial class, create collaborative and cooperative learning situations so that the students can discuss among themselves, propose ideas and exchange opinions. Such discussion can help them to prepare a good presentation in the forum. This is because, according to Saemah, through this approach students can learn to work with various individuals, giving them opportunities to reflect on a multitude of response, apart from discussing various issues related to civilizations from different perspectives (Rahman, 2009).
2. **Forum and Mini Discussion in Tutorials and on Website.**

The forum technique should not be restricted to lecture slots only. It can be briefly conducted during tutorials. This helps students to sharpen their skills in forum and debates. Besides, by conducting mini forum sessions, students would view forum as a fun method of discussion and exchanging ideas under lecturer's supervision. In fact, forum can also be conducted using information technology such as using the application i-FOLIO and the likes (Md Yusof & Amir, 2007). According to Supyan, student forum is not spatially limited to physical location and time due to the existence of information technology of computers, the internet and mobile phones. Lecturers can pose questions related to issues regarding personality development which would later be discussed. Students also can ask questions about self development at any time (Hussin, 2009).

3. **Creating Contextual Learning.**

Organized forum and debate tournament should be increased to nurture student interest in learning personality development. Through such method, not only can students learn self development theoretically but also they can apply suitable lessons from self development course in their life. It is therefore suggested that lecturers and involved parties should strengthen modules of self development course to encourage contextual learning.

CONCLUSION

Generalization of the results of this survey was based upon the response of 73 students who took part in the forum activities. A more rigorous study must therefore be conducted involving a larger sample and larger number of questions in the survey to obtain a more accurate view.

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