

EXPLORING ACADEMICS' ESPOUSED AND ACTUAL TEACHING ORIENTATIONS AT A SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY

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—Abstract—

Academics have a responsibility of ensuring that teaching achieves its purpose. They are entrusted with the responsibility of ensuring students' personal development, acquisition of critical thinking and problem-solving skills. It is important that by the end of the course the students have the capacity to solve individual and societal problems. This can only be realised if the academics' teaching orientations support learning. However, whilst academics espouse teaching orientations that support learning, in practice they employ orientations that impede meaningful learning. This study explores the concepts of learning and teaching and links them to the espoused and actual teaching orientations of academics at a university in South Africa, explaining why academics' espoused orientations differ from orientations in use. The study adopted an inductive research paradigm that followed a qualitative research approach. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews from selected academics at the university and iteratively and reflexively analysed. Inadequate time, lack of skills, demotivated students and academics inability to reflect on their teaching orientations emerged as important factors to explain the discrepancy between academics' espoused and actual teaching orientations. It also emerged that academics' interpretation of the concepts 'teaching' and 'learning' influenced their espoused teaching orientations. The study recommends among several other things professional training of the academics.

Key words: academics, teaching orientation, learning, teaching, students, South African university

JEL Classification: I 23, I 24, I 21.

1. INTRODUCTION

The education literature has shown that teachers' methods of teaching are connected directly to what their beliefs about teaching and learning. According to Acat and Donmez (2009), there are three general teaching theories upon which teachers, including those in higher education, could base their teaching. Teaching could be either informed by transmission theories or learner-centred ones. Teaching that is informed by the transmission theory encourages teachers to take a central role (teacher-centred) in the classroom as a monopolist of knowledge. In such cases, the teacher lectures to presumably empty-headed students transferring what he knows directly to them. Jalani and Sern (2015) note that in such cases students are encouraged to rote learn, memorise information and produce such information during examinations.

While the teacher-centred teaching orientations emphasise mere information transfer to inactive students (Danzig, Chen & Spencer 2007), learner-centred ones solicit students' full participation and contribution during a specific learning event. Geysler (2004). Biggs and Tang (2007) note that such teaching orientations enable student development and growth as teachers build disciplinary depth in the subject in addition to encouragement of student participation in knowledge production processes. According to Fischer and Kollar (2010), learners guided by learner-centred and learning-centred orientations are not only encouraged to actively engage in their own learning but are made to feel ownership of the learning event. But whilst teachers normally espouse learner-centred teaching orientations, they tend to revert to teacher-centred ones.

This study was structured to render an explanation with regard to the discrepancy between academics' espoused and real teaching orientations. The study further intends to establish the academics' interpretation of the concepts learning and teaching, as this has been found to influence their teaching orientations (Sharma, Steware, Ong & Miguez 2017).

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

While playing their role as teachers, academics are charged with the task of ensuring that students realise the purpose of education and their personal development. It is vital that after going through higher education, students attain increased awareness of the need to manage their lives and work in an ever-

changing world for social change. It is incumbent upon academics as teachers to develop students in such a way that they develop theoretical and conceptual understanding of phenomena, in addition to capacitating them as societal and individual problem solvers. Furthermore, graduate students should be able to apply the competencies, skills and knowledge gained in the classroom at their work places. This is only possible if academics' teaching orientations support the aim of education. However, though academics increasingly espouse learner-centred orientations, the tendency is that they alternate to teacher-centred orientations. This is bound to limit the students with regard to mastering the skills required in professional practice as the method used in teaching confines them to content memorisation or application of rehearsed formule (Morgan, 2017). It is also bound to impede the facilitation of higher order cognitive and Meta cognitive skills like critical thinking, synthesis, analysis, interpretation and problem solving (Ramsden,2003) which are vital in the real world; and yet cannot be mediated through teacher-centered orientations. Furthermore as opposed to creating, empowered, self-directed and lifelong learners, and the continued use of teacher – centred teaching orientations could foster student-dependency on the instructors (Geysler 2004).

2.1 Aims of the study

The aims of this study are:

- To explain the misalignment between academics' espoused and actual teaching orientations at a university in South Africa
- To find out how academics at a university in South Africa conceptualise the terms 'teaching' and 'learning'.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Academics' personal teaching theories

Several authors (Gay 2010; Rodriguez & Rubio 2016; Kutálková 2017) observe that like any other teachers, academics' teaching orientations are informed by their beliefs, values attitudes (personal theories) about teaching. According to Ramsden (2003), there are three different theories upon which academics could base their teaching. We use these three theories in this study as a basis upon which we explore the academics' teaching orientations. We examine the major characteristics of each theory and indicate how the terms, teaching and learning,

are conceptualised and the teaching orientations that emanate from each of the theories.

3.1.1 Teaching and learning as information or knowledge transmission

According to Pratt (2002), beliefs that teaching and learning entail transmission of information from the academic to the students are the most common among academics. In this instance, the academic views successful students as those who can memorise and reproduce the given information. Academics whose teaching orientation is informed by the transmission theory are teacher-centred, doing most of the talking in class while the students meekly listen. However, contrary to Pratt's (2002) observation, research by OECD (2009) in a number of European, and Scandinavian countries, Australia and and Korea indicated that teachers favoured a teaching approach that elicits students participation; and thus conceptualised teaching and learning as organising learners' activities.

3.1.2 Teaching and learning as organising learner activities

Some academics believe that teaching and learning entail organising learner activities that assist the students to develop multiple and intricate ways of thinking and solving problems within a field of practice (Jonsdottir 2017). An academic who believes that teaching and learning consists of learner activities that support learning embraces the learner-centred teaching orientation. The role of the academics in this regard is to design and equip students with techniques that make it possible for them to take part in the class activities that promote meaningful learning as opposed to rote learning (Geysler 2004). Acat and Donmez (2009) point out that an academic who embraces a learner-centred teaching orientation conceptualises teaching as a supervisory act that assists and enables students to partake in the learning activities. Nevertheless research on teaching practices in OECD countries, indicated that though teachers focused on creating well-structured learning, they never emphasised learner-centred activities (OECD, 2009).

For the students to be able to construct their own understanding from the learning activities and material exposed to them, Biggs and Tang (2007) observe that the academic makes sure that the teaching and learning processes, together with the context in which teaching is done, are conducive to student knowledge creation. Geysler (2004), notes in this regard that the academic makes use of case studies,

class discussions, questions and invites questions from students, in addition to availing problem-posing learning materials to them. It is through the challenge such materials pose, that students can develop critical thinking skills.

Lopes, Albergaria-Almeida and Martinho (2015) note that the learning experience, as harnessed by the learner-centred teaching orientation, does not acknowledge the educator and the student as completely human participants in the teaching and learning event, as more emphasis is on the learner and not the teacher. Therefore, owing to this observation and against the backdrop that both teacher and learner teach each other during a learning event, Gravett (2001) concludes that the two teaching orientations may not guarantee meaningful learning. According to Ramsden (2003), this imperfection can only be rectified if teaching and learning are interpreted as making learning possible, in which case the teaching orientation will be informed by the learning-centred theory.

3.1.3. Teaching as making learning possible (learning-centred theory)

Teaching informed by the learning-centred theory is characterised as a speculative and reflexive activity. This means that an academic whose teaching is informed by this theory reflects upon what is taught and how it is taught before the teaching event (Cassidy 2004; Roby 2004). In addition, the academic listens to the students taught and colleagues in the field to bring to the fore their' experiences and prior knowledge. Such experiences are later used as an interpretative framework of new knowledge and information. On the other hand, interaction with colleagues in the field allows the academic to share the latest and effective teaching techniques. Indeed, Hubball and Burt (2004) observe that academics whose teaching approaches are learning-centred constantly work hard to learn from several sources to make their teaching better.

For these academics, teaching entails finding out about learners' misunderstandings in the field or subject. The academic, as the teacher, intervenes by creating a teaching/learning context that would aid the students to unlearn what they perceived as correct and learn what they are supposed to learn (Liu & Wu 2008). Emphasis is placed on creating dialogue and cooperation among the students. This encourages active engagement among the students themselves and with the learning materials (Gravett, 2001). During the process, students construct their knowledge from the given context. Jonsdottir (2017) indicate that for

effective teaching and learning to take place, the teacher takes cognisance of the content to be learnt in comparison to how it should be taught and learnt. In this regard, delivery methods and likely problems to be encountered during the teaching are reflected upon before commencement of the learning event. During the course of teaching and learning, emphasis is placed on dialogue and cooperation among the participants. Research on teaching practices, teacher beliefs and attitudes indicates that cooperation among the different stakeholders in the teaching and learning transaction is essential to ensure effective teaching and learning (OECD, 2009).

4. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research design was adopted in this study. It was envisaged that such a design would facilitate the collection of qualitative data from which an explanation of the discrepancy between academics espoused and actual teaching orientations would be formulated.

4.1 Population and sample

All 91 academics in the Faculty of Management Sciences formed the population. The academics who were purposively selected were willing to participate in the study. Each academic was code named with letter A (representing academic) and a number (for example 1, representing the first academic to be interviewed). Ten academics were interviewed (A1 to A10), the sample having been determined by data saturation (Trochim & Donnelly, 2008). Four of the participants taught modules in Human resource management, three offered modules in labour relations and three taught human resource development. All the participants held master's degrees in their field but were not professional teachers. Their teaching experiences ranged from 5 to 10 years.

4.2 Measures and data collection

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were used for data collection. It was envisaged that semi-structured interviews would enable the collection of enough data from which an explanation regarding the discrepancy between academics' espoused and actual teaching orientations would be formulated (Greenwood & Levin, 2005). Each interview was audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim for analysis (Henning et al., 2004).

5. DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis involved listening to the audiotapes numerous times. This provided the researchers with a global sense of what the respondents were saying. Following this, data were analysed through a process called coding. Coding entailed identifying phrases and words in the transcripts that carried similar meanings (units of meaning). The units of meaning were grouped into different categories and then labelled (Henning et al, 2004).

5.1 Credibility

Since credibility is about the truth value of a study (Maritz & Visagie, 2010), we provided logical explanations to support the research methods and techniques used in this study. Furthermore, we clearly explained and linked each phase of the research from the raw data to the reported findings, making sure that future researchers in similar contexts could follow our example. Lastly, we acknowledged and bracketed our pre-conceived ideas that were bound to impact on the findings of this study (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

5.2 Ethical consideration

A number of ethical guidelines were followed. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the university authorities. Academics' participation in the research was voluntary and all participants were informed that they had a right to terminate participation in the study with no consequences. Their informed consent was obtained and the purpose of the research disclosed to them. Participants' anonymity was guaranteed (Williman 2011:43).

6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study was designed to explain the why academics' espoused teaching orientations differed from the ones in use. It was also structured to establish how academics conceptualised teaching and learning. Ten academics coded as A1 to A10 participated in the study. The respondents' views about teaching and learning and why they taught the way they did manifested in the several themes that emerged. Themes regarding the discrepancy between espoused and actual teaching orientations included among several others, pressure to complete

syllabus and lack of time, lack of professional teaching skills and techniques, academics' inability to reflect on how they teach and demotivated students. With regard to the interpretation of teaching and learning, two major themes, namely, teaching as empowerment of students, teaching as information transfer emerged. The themes are now discussed in the paragraphs that follow.

6.1 Explaining the discrepancy between espoused and actual teaching orientations

Pressure to complete syllabus and lack of time

The participants indicated that lack of time was a major impediments with regard to the implementation of the learning-centred orientation to teaching. While A4 acknowledged that students should be active participants in the contexts of ideal learning events, he notes:

“In this institution one will never finish the syllabus if one allowed student participation. We lose a lot of time when students go on strike almost every beginning of the semester. So the easier way to finish the syllabus when you have little time is to lecture all the way and go.”

The majority of the respondents interviewed also echoed this sentiment. Echoing similar sentiments, for instance, A10 lamented about the volume of work he needed to finish in a short semester of only three months. The respondent said that he was not teaching the way he would have liked to teach because:

“...there was virtually no time to do so. Proper teaching requires proper preparation and plenty of time”.

This finding is supported by several authors (Todd & Mason 2005; Alhija 2017) who maintain that to achieve quality teaching teachers require a lot of time. The finding is further supported by the results of a survey conducted by Schiek-Schwake, Anders, Von Steinbuchel et al (2017) to determine the major impediments of high quality teaching. Out of the 833 teachers surveyed, 78% indicated that lack of time was the main factor that impeded the facilitation of quality teaching.

Academics' lack of professional teaching skills and techniques

Approaching teaching as a student empowering process and implementation of learning-centred strategies as espoused by the academics requires a myriad of skills and techniques (Pratt, 2002). It emerged that none of the ten respondents

who participated in this study had undergone training as a professional teacher. Consequently, they knew little about structuring positive interdependence within the students, promoting student interaction, ensuring group and individual accountability among students (Gravett, 2001). In a question intended to solicit the challenges encountered in trying to ensure a successful classroom, A9 indicated:

“...the biggest challenge for me is to manage the big classes, encouraging them to work in groups and ensuring that they all learn from each other ...”

In the same vein, A7 and A3 wondered how it was possible to divide a class of more than one hundred students into small groups that worked and depended on each other during class discussions. In the words of A7:

“...it becomes a nightmare (very challenging) when it comes to dividing these big numbers (of students) in small effective learning groups”.

This finding was in line with Pratt's (2002) observation, that implementing learning-centred teaching orientations does not only require effective questioning skills, but also judicious use of group processing skills. It was this ability to organise and use small groups that lacked among the participants.

Inability by academics to effect learning-teaching orientations was also linked to their beliefs about teaching. Whilst they appreciated learning-centred teaching techniques, it emerged that they themselves went through a system of education where teachers' roles never went beyond passing on information to passive learners. While describing his ideal lesson for instance, A3 compared what he called ideal and what he experienced as a student himself. The respondent indicated that today's teacher is required to engage in numerous tasks that include programme design, materials development, making PowerPoint presentations and many other duties that never existed during his time as a student.

“During my time as a student the teacher taught and we as students listened...and here we made it. When I remember this and given the constraints of time, I just teach the way I was taught.”

This finding is in line with Nghia's (2017) observation. Nghia (2017) indicates that in cases where teachers have been socialised into a teacher-centred system, many revert to the same system during their own teaching; especially in cases where they find it difficult to structure or implement learning-centred lessons.

Academics' inability to reflect on how they teach and how they would have liked to teach

Changing methods and practices of teaching call for a lot of introspection among teachers (Beltramo 2017). Examining their inner thoughts and feelings regarding the methods of teaching they use and those they would have liked to use enables them to comprehend their current teaching methods and to enact new ones if the need arose. Nevertheless, in this study respondents indicated that there was no conscious effort on their part to analyse and understand their current teaching orientations *vis-à-vis* those that they espoused. Asked whether they ever thought about their classroom methods and techniques and those they would have preferred, the respondents gave the following responses:

A1: *Not consciously*

A2: *Not always, but perhaps after teaching workshops where we are encouraged to engage the students actively.*

A3: *It depends on the topic am teaching. Sometimes I think about how I teach. Some topics are practical but as I said earlier due to lack of time I simply lecture without student involvement. It is after then that I tell myself that I should have approached the lesson differently.*

This finding is supported by the findings of a recent study by Morgan (2017). The study was designed to establish how teachers could cultivate critical reflection. It emerged that if teachers were to effectively support their students, they needed to engage in the practice of reflection; for it is through such reflection that dominant educational paradigms (like teacher-centred teaching in the context of this study) could be challenged.

The central idea that runs through the participants' responses in this case is that there is no or little reflection by the academics to enable them to discover which teaching orientations work and which do not, and how to change the latter. In a situation like this one, Soot and Viskus (2015) observe that there will always be a discrepancy between what the academics espouse and what they actually do in terms of teaching and learning.

Demotivated students

Analysed data showed the important role played by students in enabling academics' implementation of their espoused teaching orientations. A3, for example, revealed that while the use of the learning-centred teaching orientation required students' active involvement in the learning events, students were not motivated to participate actively. In A3s own words:

"...the students we teach here can hardly take part in the lesson by way of participating. Mere power point presentation takes a whole lot of coaxing for them to do. They hardly contribute as they are shy to do so in front of their colleagues. It is this reluctance on their part that makes me as teacher to simply lecture and get over the exercise (of teaching)".

The respondents further noted that their students were heavily dependent on them (the academics) as they imagined that all solutions lay with them and this made it a challenge for the students to take part in the activities. Student participation was impeded by some of them not being able to articulate their ideas in English as a second language. A5 indicated that most of his students were from previously disadvantaged schools where English was not encouraged as a medium of instruction.

"Most of these students feel inferior before a handful of their colleagues from model C schools. Consequently, they were reluctant to expose their inability to speak fluent English. They preferred to silently listen to the teachers, making it difficult for us to use the learning-centred teaching orientation."

There is need to note in this regard that students' fear and unwillingness to participate could be the result of the academics' inability to create a psychologically safe learning environment where they all feel comfortable to trust and work with each other during the process of learning. Gravett (2001) observes that a cooperative and safe learning environment is not only collaborative but also open, democratic and non-threatening. It does not only encourage and support student participation but also encourages them to express their views freely, without fear.

6.2 Academics' conceptualisation of teaching and learning

Teaching as empowering students

Most of the participants conceptualised teaching and learning as making it possible for students to use the acquired knowledge in their life worlds. Asked for examples of how he would define teaching, A10 indicated that:

"For me it simply means giving the students skills and knowledge which they will apply at their work place when they get out of university."

In agreement with A10 and in response to the same question, the following respondents stated thus:

A1: *"...teaching means assisting students to manage real life situations using the information and knowledge passed on to them."*

A6 *"...organising lectures, planning lessons and making it possible for students to acquire knowledge and skills to use for their livelihood."*

A8 *"... I see it as process through which we as teachers interact with our students and in the process we help them to solve problems. Through problem solving the students learn what they are supposed to learn."*

From the responses as captured in these excerpts, it is evident that most of the academics conceptualised teaching and learning as some empowering process that equipped students with skills and knowledge required at the workplace and to solve societal problems. Ideally, this would mean that academics who interpreted teaching and learning as an empowering process would make use of a learning-centred teaching orientation. Indeed, asked how they would have liked to teach, the respondents indicated that they would have preferred methods and techniques, which would empower their students. However, on the contrary, when asked to describe what characterised their typical lesson, the majority of the respondents described a class characterised by teaching as a process of information transfer.

In a response that epitomised the majority of the responses for example, A5 stated that:

"My lesson starts with preparation and making sure I know what am going to lecture on. This allows me to deliver an effective lecture. ...and since teaching HR is not like teaching science, I do most of the talking. We have no practicals. I teach a theoretical subject."

Teaching as information transfer

In describing their typical classes, most academics indicated that content mastery was one thing they had to do before commencing any teaching. Delivery of 'learning' and knowledge was characterised by one or two hour lectures devoid of any student involvement. Epitomising what the majority of academics did, A7 stated thus:

"I read widely and make sure I'm acquainted with the content in my subject. My lectures are between an hour and two hours long. So I have to prepare a lot of information for the students...we lecturers are the main source of information for our students...and these students look upon us to provide that information".

This response contradicts most of the academics' interpretation of teaching and learning. It indicated that whilst academics espoused a learning-centred orientation, their methods of teaching encouraged information transfer. Consequently, the academics indicated that they engaged in long lecturing sessions, disregarding students' prior experiences and providing no opportunities for student contribution. This finding is in line with Biggs' and Tang's (2007) observations. The authors note that lecturers who use the teacher-centred orientation merely pass on information as extracted from textbooks to their students with little or no reflection on it. Biggs' and Tang's (2007) observations are further supported by A6's explanation of how he manages his class. The participant indicated that, as a lecturer, the onus fell on him to look for relevant information for his students; which is then passed on to the students during the lecture. The respondent revealed that if the need arose, he would make sure that the information sought was broken down into simpler parts, understandable by the students.

The majority of the respondents in this study did not only acknowledge the necessity for student participation in the learning events, but also indicated that in the context in which they operated it was impossible to involve their students in class activities.

7. CONCLUSION

This study focused on academics' espoused and actual teaching orientations in the faculty of management sciences at a university in South Africa. Analysed data revealed a number of themes pertaining to the interpretation of teaching and learning and the reasons for the discrepancy between the espoused and actual

teaching orientations. It emerged that whilst some academics interpreted teaching and learning as empowering students, others looked at it as information transfer to students. Irrespective of how they conceptualised teaching and learning, the majority of the respondents espoused a learning-centred teaching orientation. However, they could not effect such an orientation due to a number of reasons. It is evident that if students are to be empowered through teaching and learning academics need to make use of learner-centred methods of teaching and learning. It is recommended that in order to assist academics to effect their espoused teaching orientations, the university organises professional development programmes to help them actively apply these orientations. The authors believe that promotion of academics' professional growth will make it possible for them to teach in ways that encourage student participation as required by the learning-centred theory. It is important that the practice of reflection on their goals and teaching orientations be encouraged among the academics. Such reflection is bound to sensitise academics to the reality that teaching is meant to empower students and appropriated methods to do so need to be used. We envisage that through reflective practices academics could be able to transcend from teacher-centred teaching orientations to learning-centred ones, as described in this study. Soot and Viskus (2015), observe in this regard that reflective practices have the power of revealing inconsistencies between the academics espoused and actual teaching orientation and correcting the discrepancy between what academics profess and what they do.

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