

## Higher Education Issues in the PNG Context

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### Abstract

This article explores issues for teaching and learning in the context of higher education in Papua New Guinea using a case study approach to the lecturer's experience at Divine Word University. Student issues include language barriers, cultural differences, passive attitudes, limited study skills, class size and superficial learning. For the lecturers, importance is given to motivation, the learning environment, relationships, flexibility, variety of methods and challenging students to adapt to learning in a university setting. Numerous strategies are suggested appropriate for adult learning and these include debates, problem-solving, dyads, managing mixed ability groups and development of study skills. The article provides insight to teaching and learning issues experienced in higher education and presents a variety of approaches to encourage optimal learning, for students to be active participants in class activities and to engage with higher levels of thinking such as critical analysis, synthesis and evaluation.

### Introduction

As a centre of learning, universities are expected to have the highest standards of effective teaching and quality education programs. In Papua New Guinea, McLaughlin and O'Donoghue (1996:5) quoted the work of Tylor that the aim of education was the faithful transmission of an accepted and shared way of life, in the form of knowledge from one generation to the next. Education in Papua New Guinea is more than schooling as it involves information acquisition, skills development and attitudinal formation brought about by the values and beliefs of the society in which that person lives and are partly planned by village elders, partly governed by custom and by chance encounters of childhood. (Smith, 1975:1). Thus we can safely say that education is not just a preparation for life; it is life! Just as life unfolds, increasing issues are encountered in order to meet the demanding need for survival and improvement of one's status in life and most importantly, the quest for knowledge and meaning in life.

### Issues in teaching and learning

Lecturers in universities in Papua New Guinea need to take into consideration the fact that their students represent a multiplicity of cultures. Teaching is not only one of the noblest professions, it is also one of the most demanding as one is not only expected to have mastery of the subject matter, but also to be able to deliver it well enough in a spectrum of qualities required to take a wide range of roles (Lindio, 2002). These qualities range from 'adaptability' to the culture

of the nation and its people up to the 'zest' needed to gain high levels of student motivation.

One of the glaring issues in teaching and learning are the problems of generalising about a Papua New Guinean culture for there is no one culture which is common. This is readily evident by the multiplicity of languages, over eight hundred. Though it is true that there are many similarities, there are also lots of differences (McLaughlin & O'Donoghue, 1996:4). It is impossible to come up with a theory on traditional educational practices as transmission of knowledge from one group of people may be completely different from another group. This is evident in class discussions with, for example, views of students from highland regions differing from views of students from coastal or island regions.

There is also the problem of cultural knowledge, its transmission, characteristics and purposes. Technical knowledge is rooted in the need for survival where children learn through observation, imitation and advice from adults or older children. Because of the proliferation of myths and legends, Papua New Guineans believe that this type of knowledge originated from their ancestors and deities. Since the origin of cultural knowledge is mostly rooted in magical rites and mythological folklore, such revealed knowledge was never put to a test but rather accepted as a divine gift. Cultural knowledge is also viewed as 'relevant' if it can bring one to a lucrative position just like that of a 'white man' (Smith, 1975:42)

Teaching strategies that are alien to the approaches used for traditional learning can be described as leaning towards the 'negative aspects of teaching' as they may involve reprimanding, punishing and bribing in order to motivate. Children are prone to avoid censure rather than to accumulate rewards (McLaughlin & O'Donoghue, 1996:17). With all these cultural barriers and issues, achieving the aim of teaching which is 'to make learning possible' also poses a problem for many teachers, as students frequently react to the requirements of the education process, by learning only to please their lecturers and to gain high marks (Ramsden, 1992:5-6).

On the other hand, learning issues can be traced back to 'differences' in the ways that students understand learning to occur and how those differences should be reflected in behaviour (Ramsden, 1992:18). Many students regard 'passive listening' as the appropriate behaviour in a learning situation, which could be described as a 'monologue' on the part of the lecturer with giving out information to be absorbed by the learner. Research has indicated that many students feel uncomfortable when placed in a situation where active participation is encouraged. In general, student participation in class activities is very limited. Again, this trait can be traced to the cultural aspect of Papua New Guineans where verbal interaction is not encouraged, as asserted by the Melanesian philosopher Bernard Narakobi who said, 'in their speech of silence the words gave deep meaning from their deep silence' (McLaughlin & O'Donoghue, 1996:9).

Language is a barrier to effective learning processes. English is the language of instruction in universities and this contrasts greatly with the eight hundred languages used throughout Papua New Guinea. Students are inhibited to express themselves in the medium of instruction because of limited competency in the language and for fear of using the words wrongly and being misinterpreted. This problem is supported by the findings of Kenehe that 'community school teachers do not necessarily appear to speak English well enough to teach the language effectively' (McLaughlin & O'Donoghue, 1996:5) thereby making the students' foundation of the English language wanting.

Another major issue facing the students is their passive approach to learning. In conceiving ways to improve students' learning, Biggs (1999:13) argues that it is important to focus on an 'achieving' approach. He compares the passive approach to learning as the act of 'cutting corners' and 'sweeping under the carpet'. Achieving things only to impress the teacher and pass a subject without necessarily learning things for the meaningful use in the future, becomes a futile goal. The challenge posed to teachers is how to attune these student to the intrinsic value of learning and to adopt a deeper approach. Just as the deep learners use strategies such as application, generation, reflection and theorising levels in their studies, through good teaching, we, as educators can bridge the gap of the surface learners who rely on memorising, note-taking and recognising surface learners by changing their passive attitudes into active ones.

Rather than just keep on lecturing, lecturers can involve students in problem-solving activities where higher levels of engagement are encouraged. Also of great significance, is the formulation of assessment requirements that will enable them to analyse, synthesise and evaluate. Thus the 'differences' I have mentioned above can be bridged if teaching is seen to be more than just a knowledge transmission but more of facilitating student learning through active involvement in meaningful activities. The teaching environment lecturers create is of paramount importance, for the 'surface and deep approaches to learning are not mere personality traits, but reactions to the teaching and learning environment' (Biggs, 1999:30).

### **Teaching experiences as applied to issues**

I always believe that teaching is something personal. What is effective for me in delivering my subject may be different from those who are teaching other subjects. Even my presentation of topics and lectures also differ, for it depends on the needs of the students, the mood and situation we are all in. I also believe that there is no 'one sure way' or 'only one formula' that will always work in teaching. I was further made 'aware' of it by the thesis presented by Handal and Lauvas (1987:9) by coming up with the 'practical theory' that refers to 'a person's private, integrated but ever-changing system of knowledge, experience and values which is relevant to teaching practice at any particular time'. Thus, using the components of this theory, the sharing of my personal experiences in educational situations, the influences made possible by other

academics who have created an impact on both my learning and teaching style, and lastly, the values that I have formed and have been clarified and applied in my teaching are all being put to a test in the context of higher education in Papua New Guinea.

The most important thing I learned in my years of teaching is to be 'flexible' and to constantly learn not only from further and higher studies but also most especially from my recipients - the students. I have learned to look at my students' point of view of learning and gradually lead them to a form of learning that enhances not only their conceptual skills but their whole being as a person.

As earlier mentioned, if students' approach is limited to surface learning, I employ the following strategies. Firstly, I try motivating the students to participate fully in class by giving a short 'pep talk' outside the class context. I might indicate that their response to an exercise was a profound one and would be a great contribution to the class if they shared it personally during class discussions. This boosts the students' confidence and morale and usually provides the stimulus for them to become more active participants in class. Equipped with the values of respect, compassion and service, I also project an accommodating stance for their needs and queries.

Secondly, I employ the 'dyad' approach in which students have to share their opinions with someone. Should their opinions differ, both students get an 'objective' sense of the topic, whereas if their answers are similar, they become confident their answers are on the right track (though not necessarily the correct one).

Thirdly, I see to it that the form of assessment I give will challenge them to use their higher level thinking skills of application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation by exposing them to problem-solving activities, case studies and decision-making processes.

Two of the lecturers at Charles Sturt University have also influenced my approach to teaching as their approaches are not only scholarly, but are modern and dynamic in style. Their motivational skills are exemplary and students look upon them as role models. Observing and sharing in their classes is a rewarding and fulfilling experience as one cannot help but be involved. One never experiences a dull moment. Thorough organisation and preparation are so evident that the smooth flow of the session enables the objectives to be met and student outcomes achieved. Having been inspired by their expertise and methodology, I incorporate such strategies into my teaching at Divine Word University.

Contrary to a notion that Papua New Guinean students cannot be taught in the same manner as students in other countries, my experience is that, given the chance to prove their worth, they are comparable to students around the world. Having taught students from the Philippines, Australia, Indonesia, Japan, Nigeria and the Middle East, the capacity of Papua New Guineans to learn is

no different. It is how lecturers prepare and motivate them that brings out the best in each of them coupled with the belief that they can deliver. That is why even with the advent of the emerging issues enumerated by Biggs (1999:1) that more school leavers are now pursuing higher education; most students are paying increasingly more for their education; students are more diverse in ways such as age and experience; classes have increased in size as well as in diversity; lecturers need to ensure that they have the knowledge and skills to provide quality of education for optimal outcomes.

Thus the challenge for lecturers is to continually upgrade their academic knowledge and skills to be able to adapt to emerging trends. As modern academics claim, these trends will continue, 'hence educators need to prepare now to manage these changes, re-engineering learning environments and re-inventing teaching so as to ensure that the young people in our classes today are equipped to take their place in their world beyond school, and beyond 2000 (Meadmore, et al. 1999:127). Presently, the case of increased size and diversity is accommodated at Divine Word University through the use of mass lectures for combined classes followed by tutorial classes with class sized groups.

The first experience of the lecture-tutorial approach may be considered as an adjusting period for everyone concerned. The greatest realisation from this exercise was that a pure teacher-directed lecture for an hour or two is difficult for both the lecturer and the listeners. No matter how effective a speaker may be, it is highly likely that students' concentration will wane after twenty minutes of non-stop listening. In order to avoid this pitfall, I plan appropriate times during a lecture where students can form a dyad or a triad to interact and discuss or apply what they have absorbed. This focuses the attention back on the students. The 'checking on learning' activities offered by Gibbs et al. (1984) are very effective in maintaining the students' concentration and keeping them 'on their toes'.

Regarding the problem of having mature students and school leavers together, I see to it that whenever group work or a brainstorming activity is done, each group is encouraged to have a mixture of the two sets of students. In the case of my Human Resource Management classes where degree students are mixed with diploma students, each group must have representatives of the two levels together with the criteria that each group must also have at least one from every department enrolled in the class (Communication Arts, Business Studies, Tourism and Hospitality, Health Management and PNG Studies). Thus, different viewpoints are extracted and the younger members and mature counterparts learn from each other. .

I also introduced the coined words I learned from a colleague when we did team-teaching in Quality Management and Accountability. The 'Aha!' for new insights learned; 'Ho-hum!' for those they have already come across; and I added the sad 'Uh! Uh!' for the hard to decode concepts. I make sure students are able to distinguish a 'concept' from a 'context' and are able to utilise them in their discussions, debates and oral presentations. Finally, the greatest revelation to them is their ability to distinguish 'data' from 'information' and

'knowledge' from 'wisdom'. All these challenged students to employ critical analysis with the introduction of the use of 'arguments' and 'propositions', supported by 'facts' and 'reasons' and 'other evidence' to arrive at an eventual 'conclusion'.

A debate presented in class exposed the students to two sides of an argument, minimising the preconceived biases on the topics presented. Students are not only involved in the discussion, they interview knowledgeable people on the subjects and conduct extensive research, enabling them to evaluate and judge the debating teams and the penultimate ability to learn a new form of debate which included the presentation, interpolation and rebuttal portions. This was an entirely new concept for them but a value-added one thereby affirming the claims of Ramsden (1992:4) that 'learning in educational institutions should be changing the ways in which learners understand, or experience, or conceptualise the world around them.'

### **The move to adult learning strategies**

In order to prepare students for the demands of active learning and to introduce them to higher levels of thinking, from the factual and technical to the conceptual and intellectual, it is important to ask ourselves on how we treat our students. It seems that most of us do not treat them as thinking adults but as young learners to be nurtured, if not 'spoon-fed', throughout their academic lives. As much as lecturers want the students to behave as young adults, some of us still do not trust them to do so. Some educators suggest the use of 'pedagogy' initially and 'andragogy' (or adult learning methods) at a later stage.

However, the general feeling is that university students should be treated as adults from the very beginning. The plan to start each subject with the introduction of the necessary skills required by the course is the initial step to prepare them for mature and responsible learning. These skills may consist of the general skills like note-taking, constructing essays, research and referencing skills and the highly-technical ones like critical thinking, case study skills, problem-solving skills, debating and seminar presentations. Added skills can come in the form of 'how to use the library', the use of audio-visual equipment and materials, time and stress management, and how to study effectively. With all these in place, no student can claim that they do not have these skills or that they are not ready to tackle the requirements of a course. Students are made responsible for their learning when skills on how to learn have been acquired.

Although the above-mentioned skills may have been delivered to the students, lecturers and tutors must guard themselves against biased assumptions about what students can do and cannot do. Another setback is students' often inadequate preparation from their previous studies to easily acquire 'conceptual skills' and other higher level skills. A further challenge to bridge that gap is through the learning skills earlier mentioned and by introducing the students to 'critical thinking'. It is important that students are made aware of the falsity of some of their beliefs and their tendency to view the world according to their

own personal frame of reference (Barry & Rudinow, 1990:16). Lecturers need to make it clear that critical thinking is important to make sense of what we hear and read, to gain insight into information, to make discussions more illuminating and eventually to enable us to develop and evaluate our own stand on issues.

### **Conclusion**

Teaching is more than a mere transmission of knowledge for until such knowledge is internalised and becomes a part of the students' way of life, learning cannot be considered to have been achieved. Significant learning will only take place if the learner perceives personal relevance in the content being learned, such that it becomes meaningful and important to some part of their lives (Pope & Keen, 1981:27). It must be evident by their actions that adoption of the new understanding has become integrated with prior learning. Then and only then can one safely say that what the teacher has taught has been transferred effectively. In conclusion I would like to pose this question to everyone engaged in the teaching profession: 'Why do we all have a 'favourite teacher' in our life?' Is it because 'that teacher taught us something we could not forget', 'that teacher taught us something that has affected our lives and has eventually led our lives to what they are now', 'that teacher has inspired us and has touched our lives'? Now, who would dare argue that education is indeed 'life' itself?

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