TEBELLO TLALI & LYNETTE JACOBS

TEACHING AND ASSESSMENT PRACTICES AT THE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF LESOTHO: SOME CRITICAL COMMENTS

Abstract

This paper explores the teaching and assessment practices of some lecturers at the National University of Lesotho in view of the negative perception that was created in the press and also suggested in limited research findings about quality-related issues. We adopted a qualitative approach and drew from Constructivism's theoretical lens to appraise the teaching and assessment practices at this institution. We interviewed one lecturer from each of seven faculties, and analysed samples of papers provided by them. Findings suggest that lecturers are mostly overwhelmed by overcrowded classes and poorly equipped lecture halls, together with a lack of training regarding teaching and assessment and are generally content driven in their teaching and assessment approach. We propose that the institution address these deficits by strengthening its staff development and support programmes.

Introduction

Since its founding in 1975, the National University of Lesotho (NUL) has, for many years, been the only university in Lesotho. Despite the establishment of a Malaysian Limkokwing University satellite campus in 2008, NUL has continued to cater for approximately 65% of students in the Lesotho higher education sector. With the massification of higher education taking place globally, NUL has also had a 116% increase in student enrolment between 2003 and 2010 (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Mahao, 2003; Tlali, 2014). In the midst of this development, NUL has envisioned promoting quality and innovative teaching and learning, and establishing quality benchmarks in teaching. This is articulated in its vision (National University of Lesotho, 2007, p. 21):

> NUL's vision is to be a leading African university responsive to national needs; committed to high quality teaching, life-long learning, research and community service, respected nationally and internationally.

However, the criticism and negative publicity that NUL has received in the media recently suggest that the institution is struggling to uphold this vision. According to Motsoeli (in *Lesotho Times,* 2011), the former NUL Vice Chancellor has indicated that the institution is experiencing serious problems which include the high rate of student failure. It is contemplated that, among other things, the high failure rate is due to a lack of quality teaching. A similar view is reiterated by Lloyd (in *Public Eye,* 2012, p. 1) who harshly writes:

> Only a visitor from outer space is not aware of NUL's myriad of problems: ... staff who read notes to students instead of engaging them and do not allow students to ask questions in class...

While it must be acknowledged that the media sometimes provide a distorted view of reality (Jacobs, 2014), similar concerns are raised in the few studies available on Lesotho's higher education. Mahao (2003) argues that NUL struggles to provide quality education amidst the escalating student enrolment and scarce

teaching and learning resources, while Nyabanyaba *et al.* (2012) indicate that there are high levels of inefficiency in Lesotho higher education. In addition, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), as well as the Council of Higher Education of Lesotho (CHE) both acknowledge that fostering quality learning is one of the biggest challenges facing Lesotho higher education (MOET, 2005; CHE, 2010).

Quality learning is associated with deep learning. Two contrasting learning approaches were originally conceptualised by Marton and Saljo in their 1976 study that examined students' approach to a particular task (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Smith & Colby, 2007). When asked to read a text in preparation to answer questions, the participating students adopted two different approaches. Some tried to understand major ideas in the passage, focusing on comprehending the passage (deep learning), while other students focused on what they thought would be asked and demonstrated a superficial interaction with the learning material (surface learning). Towards promoting deep learning, Constructivism has become a dominant theoretical perspective in educational debates, especially in the field of teaching and learning (Kivinen & Ristela, 2003; Vanderstraeten, 2002). This theoretical perspective is associated with metaphors of *building* or *construction* which are used to illustrate how learners acquire and internalise knowledge. Educators who seek to improve their teaching in order to meet the requirements of the constructivist approach and the promotion of deep learning, are advised to use taxonomies such as the Revised Bloom's taxonomy and the Structure of Observed Learning Outcome (SOLO) taxonomy to critically understand and examine the depth of teaching and learning (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Bumen, 2011; Smith & Colby, 2007).

Constructive alignment, based on Constructivism, is a teaching and assessment design which seeks to align or link the different components of the teaching and learning environment with the view to optimise the teaching and learning outcomes. This learning design is based on the conviction that the learners use their own activities to construct their knowledge (Biggs & Tang, 2011, p. 97).

With regard to the scarcity of research on the teaching practices at NUL, and the concerns raised about quality, we aim to provide critical comments in this study about the teaching and assessment practices at NUL[1], using the above benchmarks of deep learning, constructive alignment and learner-centredness. We will first explore the teaching and assessment practices at the institution and thereafter juxtapose them with the literature from higher education studies elsewhere.

Research design and methodology

We used a generic qualitative research design (Merriam, 2009), engaging with people whom we viewed to be most knowledgeable about the teaching and assessment practices at NUL, namely lecturers as participants in the project. First we explored the experiences, practices and perceptions of lecturers with regard to teaching and assessment at NUL using semi-structured interviews (Perry, Thurston & Green, 2004), followed by a content analysis of assessment instruments employed by the interviewed lecturers (Strydom & Delport, 2011).

---

[1] This paper is the first of a series of three papers in which we explore different aspects related to quality teaching and learning at NUL. We intend to follow it up with a paper focusing on student learning and one on institutional factors.

We interviewed seven lecturers, four females and three males – one participant each from the Faculties of Health Sciences, Social Sciences, Humanities, Law, Education, Science and Agricultural Sciences respectively. The teaching experience of these participants varied between two and eighteen years. Two of them had formal teacher training.

We gave due consideration to obtaining the required permission to protect the dignity of the participants and to ensure confidentiality (Cohen *et al.*, 2011). No coercion took place and participants were advised that they had the right to withdraw from the research whenever they wished to do so (Diener & Grandall in Cohen *et al.*, 2011). The interviews with the lecturers were recorded and transcribed. We furthermore employed strategies, such as respondent validation, triangulation, direct quotations from the qualitative data and external auditing to increase the trustworthiness and authenticity of the research (cf. Merriam, 2009; Mertens, 2010).

Findings

We focused our findings, in terms of the two issues that were explored, on namely, the teaching and assessment practices at NUL.

Teaching practices

We started the interviews by enquiring about how lecturers prepare. All the participants indicated that when preparing for their teaching, they usually start with 'reading and searching the internet for the latest information' on their respective disciplines. This also involves 'preparing course outlines[2] at the beginning of the academic year or semester'. In addition, some participants attested to looking for 'course-outlines from other institutions for benchmarking'.

However, it seems that majority of the lecturers do not state objectives at graduate level, programme level or unit level. One respondent said that she 'states objectives only in the course outline', since 'it is not clear what is required' of her. Seemingly, objectives are not fore-fronted, as expressed by one lecturer participant:

> I must confess that I tend to forget that at the end of the topic or at the end of the lesson I should still go back to my objectives to determine whether they have actually been achieved.

With regard to the selection of the teaching methods, participants differed in their practices. Some participants reported that whilst they mainly use the lecture method, they 'try to make it interactive by integrating some questions and answers' into it. Others attested to often using the case-based method of teaching. One participant clarified that:

> In my teaching, I focus on making real life examples and solving real life problems; I focus on the application of a particular content. They [the students] have to solve real life problems. I try to incorporate practical examples of real life situations.

One participant was particularly articulate in the way she explained her choice of teaching methods. She pointed out that she uses a variety of teaching methods,

---

[2] A course outline is a brief learning guide which includes a course synopsis, the aim and objectives, the topics to be covered, the teaching and assessment methods, as well as the prescribed reading materials.

rather than just the lecture method. She also pointed out that she 'consciously avoids situations where students would just sit and absorb whatever she tells them and later reproduce it'. Instead, she 'allows them to do research on their own on assigned topics and then they share the information with the rest of the class through class presentations'. She also assigns them 'group work'. In further stating her rationale for using group work, she emphasised that:

> … when some of them understand… it makes my job very easy because then they are able to explain to each other and learn from their peers and they understand better, faster.

However, there are some participants who still only use the lecturing method in the traditional sense (where they do more of the talking with little or no student activities). They cite large numbers as the main reason for resorting to this practice. One participant explained that:

> You see the way we teach, you have to stand in front of a huge group and there are no projectors, no system to assist you to do it in a way that you feel comfortable that you have covered everything to the depth that you wanted. Sometimes it becomes a pain to teach large classes without such facilities.

Another participant acknowledged that due to the big numbers one is not able to give one's best. For instance, 'one just wants to get the job done'. One participant indicated that there is indeed a great need for professional training: 'This would help us in the way we prepare our lectures, everything pertaining to teaching for us non-teachers…'.

It seems some participants use selected teaching methods which promote deep learning, such as interactive lecturing, group or collaborative learning and problem solving, yet the traditional lectures seem to be a more common method.

Assessment practices
In response to our question, the participants indicated that they give students a combination of tasks which require both knowledge and application. One participant confirmed that in her assessment she 'combines some knowledge and application questions', stressing that she puts 'more focus on application questions'. However, she contradicted herself by revealing that her distribution of assessment tasks carries more knowledge tasks and fewer application ones, i.e. 'something like 25% to application and 75% to knowledge'.

Another participant also pointed out that she follows a similar trend, and when asked to define how she distributes the assessment tasks in relation to the different levels of the learning taxonomies, she indicated her 'own assessment is more dominated by knowledge questions and remembrance'. She further added that sometimes she goes 'into application, [though] not all the time'. Another participant added that she would ask students 'one question that requires them to analyse and three questions that just cover generally what was discussed in class'.

When we analysed samples of test and examination papers that the participants provided to us, it confirmed an emphasis on content. Of the 10 examples of papers (4 test papers and 6 examination papers) that the participants were willing to share, only 2 had a higher percentage of higher order questions (50% and 60% respectively, based on the revised Bloom's and SOLO taxonomies). The rest of

papers in the sample had a higher percentage of low order questions, and one of them had 100% of low order questions.

Nevertheless, one participant (with an education qualification) appeared to do things differently. She stated that in her assessment she considers the 'learning taxonomies'. She explained that:

> Taking the Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives, I try to ask questions which allow students to engage their mental faculties at a higher level. I ask evaluation questions where they analyse stuff, where they apply stuff. I do not ask simple recall questions.

Discussion

Constructive alignment focuses on linking the intended learning outcomes, learning content/curriculum, the teaching/learning activities and the assessment tasks. In line with this, authors, such as Carnell (2007) and Hornby, Jennings and Nulty (2009) emphasise the importance of a student-centred approach, where the emphasis is on what the students do, instead of what the lecturer does, so as to actively involve students in their own deep learning. Nevertheless, the teaching practices at NUL remain mainly traditional. The NUL lecturer-participants indicated that not enough emphasis is placed on learning outcomes and that they themselves tend to forget to consider them. If this alignment aspect is not foregrounded in the majority of the teaching practices, then it cannot be ensured that the learning objectives are indeed achieved.

Constructivism is enhanced by the use of learning taxonomies, since these are useful in articulating the desired behaviours that should be elicited from the learner. They help educators to analyse the effectiveness of their teaching in terms of what students actually learn, i.e. what knowledge and skills are to be acquired/constructed and the cognitive processes employed (Vojtko & Heskova, 2010). However, only one lecturer-participant referred to the learning taxonomy.

The literature indicates that assessment plays an important role, since it determines what students learn, and how they learn it (Reid, Duvall & Evans, 2007; Van Tonder, Wilkinson & van Schoor, 2005). Thus, in order to promote deep learning, the focus during assessment should shift from declarative knowledge; what textbooks and educators 'declare' and which is usually assessed 'declaratively' by allowing students to 'declare' it back, to functional knowledge which underpins actions, and can be applied in a concrete context, such as in problem-based learning (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Tek-Yew, 2011). In contrast to this, test and examination papers that we analysed revealed a focus on mainly lower order tasks, rather than higher order tasks.

Conclusion

Quality higher education can be achieved only by ensuring a shift from surface to deep learning. Currently at NUL, deep learning may indeed be jeopardised *inter alia* by poor teaching and assessment practices of lecturers. It became evident that lecturers need to be exposed to theoretical perspectives that support the constructivist view, and also to practices that promote deep learning. They specifically need to be supported in terms of teaching and assessment for deep

learning; clear guidelines for the development of study material; and to overcome the challenges that they face of overcrowded and poorly equipped lecture halls. We note the recent developments[3] at NUL to equip lecturers with teaching techniques. However, given the significance of the findings, it is our contention that the situation will not be easily turned around. As such NUL needs to take note of the findings of this study, and improve policy and practice towards the achievement of deep learning in the endeavour to become 'a leading African university responsive to national needs; committed to high quality teaching...' as captured in its vision statement.

References

Biggs, J. & Tang, C. (2011): *Teaching for quality learning at university*. 4th Ed. Berkshire: Open University Press.

Bumen, N. T. (2007): Effects of the original versus revised Bloom's taxonomy on lesson planning skills: a Turkish study among pre-service teachers. *Review of Education*, 53, 439-455.

Carnell, E. (2007): Conceptions of effective teaching in higher education: extending the boundaries. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 12(1), 25-14.

Cohen, L., Manion, L. & Morrison, K. (2011): *Research Methods in Education*. 7th Ed. London and New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group.

Council of Higher Education (2010): *Strategic Plan 2010/11-1014/15*. Maseru: Council of Higher Education.

Hornby, G., Jennings, G. & Nulty, D. (2009): Facilitating Deep Learning in an Information Systems Course through Application of Curriculum Design principles. *Journal of Teaching in Travel and Tourism*, 9, 124-141.

Jacobs, L. (2014): The framing of school violence in the South African printed media – (mis)information to the public. *South African Journal of Education (online)*, 34(1), 1-16.

Kivinen, O. & Ristela, P. (2003): From Constructivism to Pragmatist Conception of Learning. *Oxford Review of Education*, 29(3), 363-375.

Lesotho Times (2011): *Half of NUL students fail*. 23 July 2011.

Mahao, L. (2003): Towards Curriculum Relevance: The Reform Experience of the National University of Lesotho. Paper presented at Regional Training Conference on Improving Tertiary Education in Sub-Saharan Africa: Things that work, in Accra, September 23-25, 2003.

Merriam, S. B. (2009): *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation.* San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Mertens, D. M. (2010): *Research and evaluation in Education and Psychology: Integrating Diversity with Quantitative, Qualitative and Mixed Methods*. California: Sage Publications.

Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) (2005): *Education Sector Strategic Plan: 2005-2015*. Maseru: Ministry of Education and Training.

National University of Lesotho (2007): *Strategic Plan 2007-2012, Draft 3: In the service of the Nation*. Roma: National University of Lesotho.

---

[3] This paper is based on data collected between 2013 and 2014. Since then NUL has introduced a Centre for Teaching and Learning aiming to develop staff.

Nyabanyaba, T., Thamae, M. & Nyabanyaba, M. (2012): Students' Perceptions of the Effectiveness and Impact of current ODFL Delivery in Increasing Educational Access for Marginalised Members of Communities in Lesotho. Paper presented at the 1st UNISA ODL Conference, September, 2012. UNISA, Pretoria.

Perry, C., Thurston, M. & Green, K. (2004): Involvement and Detachment in Researching Sexuality: Reflections on the Process of Semi-structured Interviewing. *Qualitative Health Research*, 14, 135-148.

Public Eye (2012): *Restructuring at NUL: A Good Policy Badly Implemented*. 7 September 2012.

Reid, W. A., Duvall, E. & Evans, P. (2007): Relationship between assessment results and approaches to learning and study in Year Two medical students. *Medical Education*, 41, 754-762.

Smith, T. W. & Colby, S. A. (2007): Teaching for Deep Learning. *The Clearing House*, 80(5), 205-210.

Strydom, H. & Delport, C. S. L. (2011): Information collection: document study and secondary analysis. In De Vos, A. S., Strydom, H., Fouche, C. B. & Delport, C. S. L. *Research at Grass Roots – From the Social Sciences and Human Service Professions*. 4th Ed. Pretoria: Van Schaik, 376- 389.

Tek-Yew, L. (2011): Exploring the relationship between the Lecturer's Approaches to Teaching and Students Approaches to Learning. A paper presented at the Enhancing Learning: Teaching and Learning Conference held at Curtin University, Malaysia, 2011.

Tlali, T. V. (2014): Towards deep learning: Exploring the teaching and learning practices at the National University of Lesotho. Unpublished MA script. Bloemfontein: University of the Free State.

Van Tonder, S. P., Wilkinson, A. C. & Van Schoor, J. H. (2005): Patchwork text Innovative assessment to address the diverse needs of postgraduate learners at the African University of the 21st century. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 19, 1282-1305.

Vanderstraeten, R. (2002): Dewey's Transactional Constructivism. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 36(2), 233-246.

Vojtko, V. & Heskova, M. (2010): Constructivist use of business simulators in education. *Communications of IBIMA*, 10, 1-11.

Dr. Tebello Tlali
National University of Lesotho
Lesotho
tebello58@gmail.com

Dr. Lynette Jacobs
University of the Free State
South Africa
JacobsL@ufs.ac.za