

Some research findings on teaching and learning in Hong Kong Universities

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In recent years, more and more educational researchers are focusing their effort on teaching and learning in local higher education and come out with enlightening findings. Following is a brief description of some of their major findings. The purpose is to stimulate discussion on daily practice.

This paper is composed of three sections with the first one talking about tertiary students, the second one about university teachers and the last one, some implications for teaching.

Section One - Students

Hong Kong Students' Approaches to Learning

Studies in recent years by local and cross-cultural educational researchers such as Kember, Gow, Biggs, Watkins, Marton and others have clearly pointed out that in the main, Hong Kong students are not necessarily rote learners who adopt a surface approach to their learning and passively receive knowledge. Instead, they adopt a narrow systematic step-by-step approach to their learning trying to understand and memorize simultaneously.

Just to quote a student from Kember and Gow's (1990) study:

"I read in detail section by section. If I find any difficulties I try my best to solve the problem before I go onto the next section. ... If you don't memorize important ideas when you come across them then you will be stuck when you go on. You must memorize and then go on - understand, memorize and then go on - understand, memorize and then go on. That is my way of studying."

(For detailed discussion, please refer to *Teaching-Learning Tips* Issue 13/96)

Hong Kong Students' Study Goals

In a study of Kelly, Wong & Pratt (1997) the earlier findings of Gow, et al (1989) were confirmed that almost half of the Hong Kong tertiary students were vocationally oriented, i. e. they entered universities for job related reasons. About 40% were academically oriented and the others sought personal development or wanted to make a contribution to society.

However, among the vocational oriented group, only a small numbers of students were motivated only by external factors — just wanting to find a good job, earn more money etc. The other vocationally oriented students expressed a detailed and personal interest in preparing for a particular profession, for example, "I want to develop the knowledge and skills to become a good accountant in future". Almost all of the academically motivated students wanted to develop their critical thinking abilities, intellectual power etc.

According to this survey, there is little evidence for a narrow, pragmatic view of university education among the majority of students although it is clearly present in a minority of cases (<14%).

Hong Kong Students' Perceptions of "Effective Teaching"

Kelly, et.al. (1997) identified five conceptions of "effective teaching":

Effective teaching as Efficient Transmission of Knowledge

The teacher is well-prepared, presents information clearly, explains well, gives good handouts, and clear guidelines, gives model answers and exam guidance, and stays within the syllabus.

Effective Teaching as Application of Knowledge

The teacher provides relevant examples and real-life examples, has professional knowledge and experience, and knows the Hong Kong situation.

Effective Teaching as Guiding and Nurturing

The teacher shows concern for students, is sensitive to their learning problems, is friendly and helpful, patient and kind, gives advice on learning skills, shows the way.

Effective Teaching as Promoting Discussion and Interaction

The teacher encourages students to ask questions, stimulates discussion, interacts with students.

Effective Teaching as helping students construct their own learning

The teacher goes beyond the syllabus, encourages independent learning, provides multiple perspectives on knowledge, inspires/stimulates thinking, makes students take responsibility for their own learning.

It was found that students' study goals were generally consistent with their conceptions of effective teaching:

Almost all the students who were motivated by external factors (just study to get a good job, more money etc.) showed a strong preference for teachers who transmitted knowledge efficiently.

Vocationally oriented students who were motivated by a personal interest in their profession focused mainly on knowledge application and guidance from their teachers.

Students who were academically oriented focused mainly on teachers who helped students construct their own learning but also on guidance, discussion and interaction.

The small number who sought personal development and serving society as their goals focused mainly on guidance and interaction with their teachers.

In the main, "provision of guidance and help" was the most frequently mentioned factor related to effective teaching and helping students to achieve what they want to achieve in tertiary education.

Overall more than 30% of students preferred a more active learning environment through discussion and self-motivated study. Another 30% sought active learning with the teacher as guide and helper. The remainder wanted the teacher to transmit knowledge in a variety of ways or to have the teacher help them with the application of knowledge. In short, very few students saw themselves in a passive role of receiving knowledge from their teachers and those that did were mainly studying for extrinsic reasons.

What Kind of Guidance and Help do Students Need?

Findings showed that most students would appreciate a teacher who acted as a guide and helper regardless of the teacher's personal style. In their subsequent interviews with students Kelly et. al found that students were prepared to accept quite different teaching styles as long as the teacher was clearly interested in helping students to learn. For instance, some students contrasted the "stern" teacher with the "caring" teacher but were prepared to accept both.

"He is stern. Compared to other professors he sets a heavier workload. And he is demanding... We admire him because he gives us confidence and he can teach us something. He didn't complain about the workload. He is smart and knowledgeable... Many students attend his lectures. The class is nearly full."

"You can see how hardworking he is. He is willing to spend effort. I think he is well prepared. He shows concern for every student. He cares for every one of us. If we are tired he is concerned about our feelings - but the subject he taught is quite boring."

Section Two - Teachers

It has to be pointed out that Hong Kong is an international city with a diverse mix of nationalities and cultures. This characteristic is also reflected among the university teachers. Though over 70% of these teachers are of Chinese ethnic origin, a considerable number of them have been exposed to a western style education at some

stage. The study by Kelly, Wong & Pratt, (1997) seemed to tell us that Hong Kong has developed its own distinctive university culture which is a mixture of east and west.

Hong Kong University Teachers' Teaching Goals

Studies by Gow, Kember, & Sivan (1992) and Kelly, Wong, & Pratt (1997) had similar findings. The general educational goal most frequently identified was an intellectual one: development of students' problem solving skills/independent/flexible/adaptive learning. This goal is very similar to that espoused by academics in western countries such as Britain and Australia. Next, but cited less often, was a vocational goal of training for specific professions. Other goals mentioned much less frequently were things like betterment of society. However, Gow, et.al. noted, in terms of what they were actually trying to achieve when teaching their own courses, these goals were reversed with professional training being a more prominent goal than development of problem solving skills.

In broad terms, most Hong Kong university teachers, regardless of their cultural origin, see themselves as facilitating learning (student-centred orientation) with few were concerned solely with knowledge transmission.

Different Ways to Achieve the Same Teaching Goal

Research on effective teaching by Kelly, Wong, & Pratt (1997) showed that the "Chinese mother tongue" group and the "English mother tongue" group (they were named as Chinese and Western groups in the following discussion) tried to achieve the goal of developing intellectual skills rather differently.

Many of the Chinese group argued that students need a sound factual knowledge base on which to build analytical skills and critical thinking. This could be called a step-by-step intellectual approach. One teacher explained it in interview as follows:

"I think every discipline has basic techniques, otherwise what do you teach? If not, you do not have any bounding and structure. In my discipline, the knowledge we teach is some design theories, philosophy and guidelines. You need to know how to enforce and use this knowledge. Learn to use them in some practical situations. It's because the practical situation is changing all the time. For example, when working on database design, you need to design step by step with reference to the structure and knowledge. These are the most basic knowledge."

A second theme common among the Chinese group was that of guiding and orchestrating the learning experience: determining just how much basic knowledge needs to be given as a basis for analysis and critical thinking and how much structure students need. For example:

"I want to balance how to give just enough to students so that they can develop their thinking. ... How to help them enter into the field, how to make them interested in the subject, how to help them grasp some important information about the subject, I think maybe they need clear explanation, concrete examples and chances to practice. At this period, it's important to start thinking. When they are stronger, they can have more information. ... If I give them with much freedom at the very beginning, they may have the feeling of absence of direction and lack of information."

The western group seemed to have a different interpretation of the goal of developing intellectual skills:

"I guess what it means to me is that students don't just take exactly what I say, or exactly what the textbook says and give it back to me, that they actually take some background and pull it together and process that together with the new situation and come up with a different solution."

And there were more extreme views among the western group, in particular about the value of subject knowledge in the process of learning. Among this group, specific subject or discipline knowledge was seen as irrelevant to the goals of education. Subject knowledge is merely a vehicle for teaching thinking skills and approaches to problem solving without intrinsic value in its own right. Students are expected to construct their own knowledge from the outset with an open and critical mind.

"This is the whole point. ... It doesn't matter what it is you teach. It's how you go about it. The fact that you might end up getting the knowledge that you need to be a lawyer is an irrelevancy. It's irrelevant to the education."

Hong Kong Teachers' Attribution of Effective Teaching

From the survey data of Kelly et.al (1997) the Chinese and Western groups differed in term of attribution of effective teaching to teachers alone, to students alone, or teachers and students together. The Chinese group were more inclined to attribute effective teaching to students (26%) or both teachers and students (31.5%) and 35% to the teacher alone. For the Western group only 7% attributed effective teaching to students and 46% to teachers alone and 18% to both teachers and students. The rest consisted of a mixture of contextual factors such as class size, subject taught etc.

For both groups the most important qualities of the students were that they are responsive, interested, attentive and diligent.

In terms of the teachers' contribution to effective teaching, overall the Chinese group emphasized the importance of lecture presentation skills (45.5%) and preparation for lectures (29%) followed by helping and guiding students in their learning (9%). The Western group emphasized delivery/presentation skills (39.%) and preparation for lectures (13%) followed by helping and guiding (10.5%), but unlike the Chinese group also included their ability to critically challenge their students (8%).

Different Approaches to Helping and Guiding

However, there is evidence to suggest that the idea of helping and guiding students may be interpreted differently by the two groups. In the Chinese group it seems to imply a sensitivity to students' needs and interests and the need to continually adjust teaching to meet these.

“When I am teaching, I emphasize the on-the-spot atmosphere and care about their response. I will try to feel in which area the energy level is. This group or that group? Boys or girls? I will respond to them. I will try to energize their responsiveness. I will give them reinforcement. In class, I often ask students questions. But I will phrase the questions according to their abilities. If they look silly today, I will ask simple questions. If they look very good and smart today, I will ask more difficult questions. I will say that they are smart and tell them I am asking a difficult question. That means I will control the class atmosphere and sense their energy level. This is very important.”

The Western group, on the other hand was much more concerned with helping via assignment marking or with providing opportunities for success rather than structuring the learning to take account of individual's needs specifically.

“I don't criticize individual pieces of work. What I do is I write a general description of overall problems that were wrong within an assignment and then I give a model answer showing how was a reasonable way of doing it. I actually don't go and do individual things on individual student's piece of work. But I give them a general overview of what was wrong. They can figure it out They can tell what they've done wrong if they look at my solution after criticism.”

A version of helping and guiding among the western group is the idea of provoking and critically challenging students.

“... it's certainly making challenges. I mean giving students challenges is part of the thing of giving them the opportunity to do something. If we don't challenge them and yet we expect them to discover something and we don't challenge them I mean how can they do it?”

“So that in cases where for example I would deliberately be provocative and members of the class are ... then will come back to me and say “We disagree. We think that the case of Jones versus R says this and you've said it means this” and so forth. So I think that's a very practical example of success.”

Different Approaches to Teacher-student Relationships

In both Chinese and Western groups there was a concern for teacher-student relationships, but once again this was interpreted differently by the two groups. The important aspects for the Western group were knowing students' names, presenting a professional approach to the relationship, knowing what students are capable of, allocating office hours to students, giving students lecture notes, presenting oneself as a caring person.

However they cautioned that caring was a time-consuming business. Some were, however, wary of being too close to students because of their dual role as assessor and pointed out that they were walking a fine line.

“The critical thing is to have a professional approach to the relationship in the learning environment.”

“My attitude towards whether I think that I care for students is whether I believe that I have what I would call a professional approach to ..that means they know what is expected of them, they know what I will deliver to them, and they know what I do in terms of assessment is going to be fair. In terms of my business of caring for them if I do that properly then I believe that I’m caring for them.”

“So I try to keep very caring but I keep a distance in the sort of things I do.”

The emphasis in the Chinese group was much more on informality in their relationships with students even though they also recognized that it takes up a lot of time. Uniquely some used the concept of “Heart” to express the way in which they cared for students.

“Even though generally I am quite opened up, students can come at any time they want. It’s much more comfortable to chat with them. Because you know, when they come to your office, they would be more friendly.”

“Just if you care and appreciate the students, they will spend more time on learning your subject and so they develop interest in it. I think it is related to communication.”

In summary, at a general level, research on teachers’ conceptions of teaching, their goals and conceptions of teaching effectiveness show similarities between Hong Kong and Western studies and between Chinese and Western teachers in Hong Kong. But on closer inspection there are subtle but important differences in how teachers interpret these conceptions in practice and in how they view their relationships with students.

Section Three - Implications for Teaching in Hong Kong

- Hong Kong looks very westernized in many aspects and its university system, by and large, is patterned after some prestigious ones in the West. But in a real sense, the university system has developed its own characteristics and is essentially very different from its counterparts in the West. Evidence shows that Hong Kong students use a different approach to their study. As a group, they are fairly vocational-oriented. They demand guidance and help from their teachers but are receptive to different teaching styles. It is simply unwise to assume that teaching and learning will be conducted in much the same way as the prestigious universities in the West.
- While almost half of the Hong Kong students expressed their vocational goals in university education, many teachers interpret a university education rather differently stressing the acquisition of intellectual skills and independent learning, since this will better equip students for the future than specific knowledge that will become outdated quickly and in any case will not develop graduates who can solve problems in a range of unpredictable and unstructured situations. But pressure from students to teach specific vocational skills seems inevitable given the large numbers who have this orientation. There was some evidence that teachers were preoccupied with the tension between university education to develop the intellect vs. training for specific professions. They did question whether a university education should equip students with specific knowledge and skills for a given profession or whether it should focus on the development of intellectual skills that can be applied in a range of situations.

Another question is, can intellectual skills, the commonly agreed goals of university education, be developed in a context that stresses application and adaptation? In other words, can the mind and the hands be developed at the same time in university? Are our university teachers well equipped with the appropriate work experience to help their students to develop both professionally and intellectually?

- The concept of effective teaching has different connotations to different students who espoused different goals for their university education. But the teacher-student relationship is always quoted as important to students’ effective learning. Most students will appreciate a teacher who acts as a guide and helper, regardless of the teachers’ personal style or ethnic origin. Teachers who appear insensitive to the needs of

students for a number of reasons are viewed as not effective.

“He is a soloist. ... I think those teaching without considering the difficulties and reaction of students are ineffective teachers. They continue to present all their slides without caring if students understand or not. They aim to finish all the slides as soon as possible. ... They keep turning slides.”

“If some lecturers were brought up in the American educational system they are trained to be creative. They will expect students to be creative. They don't know the characteristics of Hong Kong students and their ways of study...”

How do you see these findings in your own experience? Discussion and comments are welcome.

We would really appreciate if you can send your ideas to the Teaching-Learning Tips to stimulate further discussion.

Reference

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