SHATTERING STUDENT PERCEPTIONS AND RESISTANCE: ADOPTING NEW NOVEL STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING METHOD

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Abstract

The demands of the Western organizational and academic world and the way it is being conducted are changing incessantly. Adapting learning to the changing and unknown needs of the future requires implementation of changes in the learning objectives, methods, and assessment. Adapting and preparing students to a changing world requires developing new skills. Introducing skill development into academic studies often requires adapting courses and assignments. Students frequently express initial opposition to the introduction of these paradigms as part of their discomfort with accepting personal responsibility for their learning process and the need to invest more intensive effort. These negative attitudes often influence students’ willingness to cooperate and become involved and comprise a disincentive to adopt changes. This is liable to impede their training and even pose obstacles for adopting these changes in additional courses.

This study examines and compares changes in attitudes towards student-centered learning among students who received student-guided learning (SGL) instruction, which is a novel method emphasizing the student’s primary role and self-expression.

The methodology was assimilated in a 3-unit course in Health-Care Provider - Patient Relationship in the Department of Service Organization Administration in the Interdisciplinary School for Society and Community at Hadassah Academic College. The data in the research was collected from 120 students within the framework of four courses over a period of two academic years. Questionnaires and self-reflections were filled out by the students at the beginning and end of the course and were analyzed qualitatively. The application of SGL methods resulted in changes in students’ attitudes towards adopting new teaching methodologies. Their initial attitudes constituted opposition to adopting new learning methods. During the course and at its completion, the students succeeded in changing their attitudes and their experience regarding the process of active cooperative learning and independent learning to directions of adopting innovative methods, willingness to learn, and greater involvement.

At the beginning of the semester the mapping of perceptions and attitudes regarding the adoption of new teaching methods led to opposition to adopting change. This opposition was expressed in low motivation, lack of cooperation, negative attitudes towards assignments in the course, and lack of motivation towards adopting changes. At the end of the course there was an improvement in students’ openness to changes, and they showed a greater desire and higher motivation to adopt new paradigms and innovative methodologies. They assumed a more positive attitude towards assignments and the learning process within this context. The SGL methods rationale and details of the stages involved, as well as reasons for the changes in attitudes, will be discussed.

The effect of this change - which is characterized by the elimination of students’ opposition - enables future openness and adoption of these paradigms in other academic courses as well as changing their attitudes towards their ability regarding cooperative learning, independent learning, and presenting the material. These traits will transform them into better students as well as graduates who are better adapted to the needs of the 21st century. These changes will render the academia more relevant in training students who are suited to the ceaselessly changing environment.

Keywords: Student-Guided learning (SGL), student centered learning (SCL), Life Long Learner, Innovative teaching methods.

1 INTRODUCTION

The Western world’s business and academic sectors require constantly changing skill-sets. Consequently, the relevance of teaching and of academe is becoming increasingly crucial. To adapt
learning to such changing future needs that are not necessarily knowable today we must change the goals of learning, how learning takes place, and how it is evaluated.

Academic institutions are increasingly seen not only as purveyors of knowledge but as agents of cultural change that must provide their students with new skills. ([1]) To adapt to the evolving workforce and academic world, students must be able to solve real problems in real time and to synthesize personal and existing knowledge to meet the daily challenges of a constantly changing world. ([2],[3])

To meet the market’s constantly changing and increasingly challenging demand, educators must think innovatively and create learning frameworks that will help students achieve the ultimate goals of their studies. This path involves acquiring and developing of learning skills and building a learner’s toolbox with which the student will always be relevant in the labour market and maintain and increase their value proposition.

Often, teachers focus on the subject being learned in a narrow way and ignore the comprehensive, multidisciplinary view of the market that is already changing today and will certainly continue to do so. ([4]) Therefore, one of the tasks of college educators is to guide students so they acquire excellent problem-solving abilities, integrate the material learned, and apply it in a collaborative setting, all with the aim of achieving substantial capability for lifelong learning. ([5])

This philosophy—which shifts the emphasis from the traditional process of teaching in which the lecturer is the main focus to a learning process in which the process the student undergoes is the main focus—has existed for a number of years at various levels of education. Nevertheless, few educators adopt this approach and most of them regard it with a certain degree of skepticism. ([6]) Moreover, Opposition exists at three levels: the lecturers, the students, and the teaching environment.

The lecturers view these paradigms with suspicion for fear of losing their power as the unique authority in learning and knowledge. ([7]) Sometimes they object because of the convenience of using familiar traditional methods, which do not require the effort needed to adapt and change the course and the learning method. ([8])

Students, too, adopt innovative theories of learning with considerable trepidation and exhibit broad initial opposition to the introduction of such paradigms. This is partly because of their discomfort with accepting the responsibility and power involved in decisions related to their studies and partly because assuming responsibility for their learning process often requires them to work harder. ([9])

In addition to these obstacles, the academic environment in which the lecturer functions does not necessarily support and contribute to the adoption of these paradigms, for several reasons: budgetary constraints, research pressure, and other academic demands that compete for the lecturer’s time and ability. Also, the system of incentives for academic advancement, the students’ pressure to receive good grades, and the large number of students all weigh against adopting innovative paradigms to which the students are highly antagonistic. ([10])

These obstacles prevent the free adoption of such teaching paradigms or even a change in awareness regarding the shift in emphasis needed in higher learning—despite the growing understanding of the crucial need to adapt the teaching methods to the needs of the market.

Nevertheless, the growing recognition of this need has led to attempts to adopt new learning techniques that will reduce opposition. These attempts are the basis for our approach—Student-Guided Learning (SGL): Although the lecturer points the way, the student leads the learning process. The term SGL refers to the methodology of building and teaching a course in which the student plays an important part right from the first stages of choosing the content and learning materials, is responsible for teaching some of the content, and even makes decisions regarding the inclusion of topics and how they are to be presented. To enable this process and its inclusion in academic courses, the student must set goals and show the way under the close guidance and supervision of the lecturer, who leads the student on the long active journey to a goal that is near (in the course) and one that is more distant and never-ending (lifelong learning).

In developing the concept of SGL, we combined various teaching methods and models that involve collaborative learning, in all of which students study together to achieve a shared goal. ([11]) Achieving the goal requires positive mutual dependence among the students: Each individual is responsible for his/her own learning and for contributing to the group. ([12]) Such learning emphasizes the process of learning and is characterized by active learning. The lecturer is not the sole source of knowledge, and the learning is led by students’ choices, under the guidance of the lecturer.
2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Participants and Educational Settings

SGL was used in a three-unit elective on the health-care-provider–patient relationship, in the undergraduate sub-specialization in the management of health service organizations, in a large academic college in Jerusalem. The course focuses on the relations between health-care professionals and patients and on the interpersonal relations between them as important factors in support and healing.

2.2 Data Sources

The data for this article were gathered in four courses over two academic years and involved some 120 students and two lecturers who gave the same course simultaneously. The data were gathered at the beginning and end of the course through questionnaires and students' written reflections. The questionnaires and reflections were analysed using qualitative research methods. ([13])

2.3 Description of the Teaching Methodology

In SGL the student influences and chooses the content of the course, how the course will proceed, and how the content will be presented. This process is guided directly by the lecturer, who integrates the subject matter of the course.

In planning a course using this type of methodology, the lecturer must define in advance which abilities are to be developed and the broad areas and topics that will provide a framework of values and learning objectives. This framework constitutes the boundaries of the subject matter that will be chosen by the students. Problems and cases will be presented within these boundaries. ([14])

This methodology involves nine stages that constitute points of guidance and interface between the lecturer and the students: describing the individual experience, transforming the experience into an event/dilemma, making the student the expert in his/her area/constructing a data base, working in a small group and teaching by the student, discussion and decision-making by the group, executing a summary project, peer review, presentation of the project by the group, and group and individual reflection.

2.4 Research Questions

In this study we examined the effect of the use of the innovative SGL methodology of teaching on students’ attitudes, perceptions, and willingness to adopt innovative teaching methodologies as opposed to traditional teaching methods.

2.5 Data Analysis

The variables were measured at two points in time: the beginning and end of the course. We also examined the individual reflections obtained at these two times. The questionnaires and reflections were analyzed by means of a qualitative method, which included constructing topics (themes) and categorizing the text. The relations between the categories were mapped and comparisons were made between the two time points. In the following section we describe the main categories and the changes in the students’ perceptions and attitudes regarding innovative learning methodologies.

3 RESULTS

Analysis of the categories and a comparison between the categories at different times during the course reveal that the students’ attitudes that were formulated on the basis of their familiarity with traditional content and teaching methodologies were the source of their attitudes toward the adoption of innovative teaching methodologies.

The students’ perception of their world is determined inter alia by the teaching methods used from kindergarten through college. These attitudes shaped their opposition to, and low motivation for, adopting other learning methodologies and were exhibited in the categories at the start of the course.

By the end of the course in which the SGL methodology was used, there was a change in the students’ attitudes, perceptions, and experience regarding the adoption of active teaching
methodologies and individual learning. We also found that students who had previously studied using such methodologies displayed less initial opposition and higher motivation for such collaboration.

The main categories involved perceptions of the degree of difficulty of learning with active (innovative) methodologies as opposed to passive (traditional) ones. Students are generally used to receiving material in a prepared and complete form, and in many ways, this is perceived as easier than active learning. This perception is evident in the analysis of the students’ initial reflections:

“It is much easier to receive the material from the lecturer.”

“It was hard for me to figure out on my own how I was supposed to find the material.”

There was also a great change in the categories of opposition to adopting innovative learning methodologies (active learning) and the lack of willingness and motivation to participate actively in the topics studied.

“There is great pressure during the semester because of papers to be written; therefore, I prefer not to have to be part of a large project but rather to be tested.”

“It is easier to take one test and be done with it; I have no desire to work in this way.”

A comparison with data in these categories from the end of the course shows a change in the motivation to learn using innovative and active methodologies like SGL.

“It was a long slog, but I desire to learn more.”

“I feel that I want to take more courses [of this type].”

Another striking category in the data analysis is that of a feeling of capability: At the beginning of the course the project aroused students’ fears, and anxiety regarding their ability to complete the course and achieve their objectives.

“I asked not to have to present.”

“I didn’t really think I would succeed.”

However, at the end of the process, the students’ felt a high degree of capability and even pointed out positive experiences.

“Even though I didn’t think that I would want to present, I enjoyed it and I was not afraid to present, even before the college president...”

“I surprised myself while presenting the project.”

By the end of the course using SGL methodology there was a change in the students’ attitudes, perceptions, and experiences regarding the adoption of active teaching methodologies and independent learning. Support for these findings can be found in earlier studies on the student-centered class: When students are forced to assume responsibility and a degree of independence in their studies instead of using traditional learning methodologies, the responses are similar to those of the stages of mourning and of trauma: (15) shock, denial, strong emotion, resistance and withdrawal, struggle and exploration, return of confidence, surrender and acceptance, integration and success.

Students’ responses will vary to some extent. Some will go through most of the stages, some will remain longer in one stage or another. Passing through the various stages is essential and is part of the student’s growth and transformation into a lifelong learner (16, 17) Therefore, to lower the level of opposition and to make individual learning easier, the student should be allowed to do this in a structured framework of guidance. (18)

The methodology proposed here allows the student room to maneuver within a learning framework that is structured but broad enough to enable independent learning. Including SGL as one of the methodologies in the student-centered classroom in higher education allows for clear guidance for both the student and the lecturer. The fact that the choice of topics to be studied is based on the student and the student’s experiences (personal history) and that this constitutes the basis and starting point for the study of dilemmas in a particular field makes possible a personal connection on the student’s part that maximizes the student’s learning capabilities. These experiences help change perceptions and objections to adopting innovative teaching methodologies like this one and make it possible to build motivation and a feeling of capability among students as well as willingness to adopt and use innovative active teaching methodologies. In this case, student-guided learning was
combined with active teaching methods and presentation of material in a way that was individually adapted and varied.

4 CONCLUSIONS

It is very important to adapt academic learning to the changing needs of the labor market and the academic world. This requires adopting learning and teaching methods in which the emphasis moves to the student, with the lecturer as a support and guide. The adoption of such methodologies encounters many difficulties, including negative attitudes regarding these methods and low motivation among students to adopt them. ([8],[17],[15]) The students’ reflections in this study show a change of attitudes toward the adoption of innovative learning methodologies. Using SGL methodologies while providing guidance enables the student to gain confidence, which contributes to motivation and the feeling of capability and generates willingness to adopt these methods in other courses in the future.

Shattering the opposition and obstacles to the adoption of innovative learning strategies can help transform students into individuals with varied and original learning abilities suited to the 21st century. It can also help change both students’ and lecturers’ negative attitudes that are often an obstacle to learning that is adapted to change and it can encourage the adoption of these teaching methodologies.

The adoption of models such as SGL and making the learning environment accessible for students is a process that reinforces itself because it contributes to the students’ strong feeling of capability and high motivation. These constitute a step toward making academe more relevant than ever in producing graduates who are prepared for a changing market.

REFERENCES


